Making General Education Meaningful

Shannon Watkins

September 2023

THE JAMES G. MARTIN CENTER FOR ACADEMIC RENEWAL

353 E. Six Forks Road Suite 200
Raleigh, NC 27609

919.828.1400
Fax: 919.828.7455

www.jamesgmartin.center

ISSN 1935-3510

Cover Image: Schoolroom of Winchester College, 1860s

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Higher education serves many purposes. One purpose dominates, however: to students, their parents, future employers, government officials, and many academic administrators, higher education is all about preparing students for the professional workforce. Roughly 60 percent of the courses a student takes are in his or her major field of study, in which the student hopes to be eventually employed.

Other requirements, such as general education programs, are considered to be of lesser importance. In many cases, they are designed solely to support the primary goal of training professionals, providing generalized skills that can be translated to many professions. Or they are treated dismissively and are so unfocused as to be little more than academic "taste-testing," a leisurely stroll through a series of courses chosen to satisfy idle curiosities or because they require little study time.

Yet treating general education programs as secondary constitutes a great loss of opportunity, as well-designed programs have the potential to help students become better citizens, deeper thinkers, and more moral people. On the other hand, general education programs focused on providing students with general skills can even fail at their main goal by not considering how students actually learn and which types of knowledge are best to improve reasoning prowess.

In this report, Shannon Watkins goes where most academic administrators and policymakers in charge of general education programs are too timid, too biased, or too unaware to tread. She explores actual learning processes at a primary level and shows why a tightly crafted general education that deliberately connects various types of knowledge and learning is vastly superior to one that that allows students wide latitude to choose among unconnected courses that may appear to be interesting at the time but offer little long-term insight. And is also preferable to one that attempts to teach skills without bothering with the content involved.

Watkins also makes a claim—and backs it up with powerful evidence—that will likely alarm academic administrators who are more inclined to flee from difficult decisions than to embrace truth that goes against the current orthodoxy. She suggests that some bodies of knowledge—particularly those that comprise the Western tradition—offer superior insight into the workings of nature and humanity than others.

Watkins's report should be read—and acted upon—by all policymakers, administrators, and academics who are truly concerned with the quality of education our colleges and universities provide. To do otherwise is to cheat both students and society of the great benefits that can be produced by well-crafted general education programs.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

"These great universities—which can split the atom, find cures for the most terrible diseases, conduct surveys of whole populations and produce massive dictionaries of lost languages—cannot generate a modest program of general education for undergraduate students."

—Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*[1]

General education is the unglamorous and often misunderstood component of a college education. To some legislators, educational bureaucrats, and prospective employers, it is merely a way to teach specific skills desirable in the workplace. To many students, it's a bothersome list of requirements they must get out of the way before advancing to the more interesting content of their majors and electives. And sometimes faculty treat it cynically, demanding that their own esoteric classes be included in the program to boost enrollment.

But a serious and good general education program has far greater importance than any of those views suggest. While the major program of study provides students with their intellectual focus and (often) their vocation, and a general education program can provide valuable skill-building, wise and serious general education programs will fulfill several crucial roles that those currently crafting these programs are inclined to ignore. They can greatly deepen students intellectually by teaching them to reason in the fuller sense rather than merely criticize. They can impart essential knowledge. They can reinforce the civic and humanistic values imperative for a flourishing society. Additionally, they can improve skill-building by making it more meaningful.

That is where the exploration of general education should begin: with a vision of the skills, knowledge, and habits of mind that college graduates should have once their educations are complete.

Once that is done, the next step is how to proceed to achieve that vision. That means addressing the refusal by many colleges to explicitly state *which* specific knowledge students should learn in their general education programs. For example, while many general education programs have a requirement that students take a history class, they permit students to take any history class, including those with a narrow focus and of minimal importance, instead of making students familiar with the most important events, trends, and ideas.

The implications of this refusal to be specific cannot be overstated, and its consequences are numerous. For one, failing to define which knowledge students should learn undermines the goal of fostering adept reasoners. Research suggests that students cannot develop strong reasoning skills without a coherent curriculum specifically designed for that purpose. Secondly, the failure to prescribe a shared body of knowledge at the college level is detrimental to broader social unity. The Founding Fathers understood that for the country to stay intact, its citizens needed to have a common base of shared knowledge.

Because the lack of specificity is so damaging, perhaps the most important task in designing general education curricula is defining which knowledge is essential. What body of knowledge, then, should be taught?

The answer is that a good general education should expose students to the knowledge at the center of the vast Western intellectual tradition, which includes the study of history, science, mathematics, literature, and philosophy.

Such an education introduces students to life's biggest questions; it invites them into a centuries-long conversation about questions of both practical and existential importance: "What is truth?" "What does it mean to be a just person?" "Does a transcendent order exist?" It also provides specific and coherent knowledge that is crucial for the development of cognitive skills needed for evidence-based reasoning. Furthermore, familiarity with the West is to be familiar with one's own intellectual and moral origins. When this knowledge is generally shared throughout the country, it strengthens social unity.

Other problems abound in general education, such as a ubiquitous lack of rigor in required courses. It is natural for students with difficult majors to wish for easy general education courses to lighten their already heavy study burden. Also, schools may wish to make general education requirements easier so that even the least-gifted students may pass them. But doing so adds little value to an education. For instance, you cannot improve students comprehension and reading skills if they never have to read and discuss difficult texts.

Furthermore, a dumbed-down general education will likely produce intellectually and morally impoverished citizens and political leaders. Those in the most influential spheres of society, from government to journalism to higher education, are the products of what they learn in college. Works of great intellectual achievement can help students develop a heightened moral awareness and enlarge their worldviews, which are often limited to the confines of their own perceptions and experiences.

General education can be done right, but college leaders must be bold enough to take the steps necessary to give students the education they—and the country—need.

Those invested in restoring excellence to the curriculum must make general education a top priority. The first section of this report will briefly establish a vision of the generally educated graduate. The second shall begin by establishing the necessity of specific and rigorous knowledge for learning and the development of abstract reasoning skills. It will then explore three reasons why that knowledge should emphasize the intellectual inheritance of the Western tradition. The third section traces a history of general education curricula at the university level starting from the mid-19th century. This will help explain how we got to where we are today. Finally, the fourth section will consider some alternative visions of general education and will conclude with a preferred curriculum.

As this report will explore, the state of general education today is grim. But it doesn't have to stay that way. General education can be done right, but college leaders must be bold enough to take the steps necessary to give students the education they—and the country—need.

PART I. GENERAL EDUCATION: DEFINITION AND PURPOSE

A general education—as opposed to a specific disciplinary major or area of concentration—consists of a set of requirements from a wide range of the major areas of human knowledge that all students at a college, regardless of major, must complete. At most institutions, it consists of about 30 percent of a student's entire college education.

College is a time of intense intellectual and analytical development. If students are to flourish in their academic and professional pursuits, they need a comprehensive framework that they can build from and refer to throughout their lives. A familiarity with the broad sweep of history and a general understanding of the most important themes of literary, philosophical, and economic thought will give them a sound basis to evaluate moral and social issues. And even help as a guide through life.

A meaningful familiarity with the humanities isn't necessary only for humanities students or those in the "soft" social sciences, however. For one thing, while scientists will gain their core skills from their majors, a robust humanities education, by making them better humans, will equip scientists to appreciate the implications of their fields for society. Fields developing world-shaping technologies like artificial intelligence, nuclear physics, genomic editing, and biological cloning are too consequential to be led by those with no appreciation for ethical, political, or economic reasoning.

Moreover, the humanities component of a general education program can in fact prepare science majors to be better scientists. The greatest scientists were also humanists: René Descartes, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin, Albert Einstein, and Niels Bohr are most famous for their purely scientific discoveries, but all these thinkers were accomplished philosophers too, and they did not make their discoveries in a vacuum. They had a vision of the development of their fields and of their fields' interconnections with other areas of human thought.

If familiarity with the humanities can elevate the thinking of scientists, exposure to the sciences may be even more crucial for those whose main academic interests are in the liberal arts. First-hand participation in the scientific process can instill an understanding of how to base one's decision-making on evidence rather than on unfounded assumptions. Factual awareness of the natural world should inform everybody's reasoning, not just those actively engaged in the practice of science. And can anybody say they truly grasp society and history if they do not have some sense of the important scientific discoveries that shaped the modern world?

If institutions of higher learning seek to produce serious thinkers, skilled professionals, and wise citizens, their general education programs should be prescriptive, broad, coherent, and rigorous. They must also reinforce the civic and humanistic values indispensable for a united and prosperous society. Consider the following guidelines:

- *General education programs should be prescriptive, not self-directed.*

  Colleges and universities must set educational priorities. General education programs should define what knowledge is essential for students to learn and give clearly defined parameters that constrain student choice. This can be done by mandating they take a specific series of courses.

Colleges and universities must set educational priorities.

Conversely, a general education that allows students to "design" their own customized pathway through their general education risks depriving them of knowledge essential to their intellectual development as citizens and participants in society.

- *Students should be able to apply their learning to a broad range of important topics.*

  The range of students' baseline knowledge must be broad both across and within subjects. It's not enough to have a narrow understanding of one short period in American history, nor is it desirable to be knowledgeable of "Modern Chinese Popular Culture" or "Twentieth Century Hindi & Urdu Fiction" but mostly ignorant of the great works of literature of the Western World.[2]

- *Courses in a well-crafted general education program should not be disconnected but should work together to produce a coherent worldview.*

  Such insight is not developed through nonchalant or uninformed choices, but by proceeding deliberately through the building blocks of a meaningful framework. A good general education will acquaint students with an integrated awareness of the history of political, economic, and cultural institutions of the United States and the West generally, along with their culture's major philosophical and literary achievements. Without that, students will be ignorant of their cultural roots, which will inhibit their ability to intelligently engage in the country's civic institutions and to meaningfully relate to each other as Americans.

- *If a general education is to be taken seriously by students, it must be rigorous.*

  On the humanities side of a general education program, students should engage with serious texts and ideas that have significantly influenced the trajectory of Western thought. The nature of assignments and grading should push students to their intellectual limits and encourage academic excellence. When applicable, students should be required to engage frequently with and develop ideas in written format. The importance of writing well cannot be overestimated; it is essentially applied thinking, forcing the writer to organize his or her thoughts in order to make a rational argument or plausible narrative.

  On the quantitative side, students should be exposed to subjects in which there are right and wrong answers. Humanities students are sometimes rewarded for mere cleverness; that does not work in mathematics and the sciences. Grounding students on proper methods can be an invaluable part of a general education.

- *Students are at an appropriate level of maturity and intellectual attainment to grasp high-level civic and humanistic values. Education does not teach skills alone but influences the whole person.*

  Higher education should direct students toward human excellence, civic virtue, and the pursuit of truth. Since many students will attain positions of importance post-graduation, some consideration should be given toward forming them to be wise and good as well as skilled. General education is the ideal venue to introduce students to questions of perennial value that will inform their own personal, civic, and moral decision-making.

A good general education can be likened to a musical composition or a masterful painting. People do not attend an orchestra performance to hear a few segments of a symphony, nor do they go to an art museum to look at isolated close-ups of a painting. They want to appreciate these works of art as comprehensive wholes. To the extent possible, general education should similarly expose students to the development of essential human knowledge presented as a meaningful and substantive unity. It is the proper vehicle to blend all of the disparate elements of education's transformative potential to produce an educated human being.

PART II: A HIGHER VISION OF GENERAL EDUCATION

General education programs provide a grand opportunity to elevate higher education beyond mere vocational or professional training. Today, that opportunity is almost always squandered as current general education programs aim low; they seem to be designed by committees filled with self-interested parties out to craft programs to their own advantage.

But there is a vision of general education—a highly informed and coherent vision at that—that accords with both the needs of students and the needs of society. To create such a program requires making decisions with great purpose and deep insight. The following section is divided into two parts. The first half identifies that vision and provides supporting reasoning why it should be preferred. The second half discusses how to create a program based on that vision.

HOW LEARNING WORKS AND WHY KNOWLEDGE MATTERS

One important goal of education is training students to address complex ideas or problems in a rigorous fashion and arrive at evidence-based conclusions. But there is a good deal of disagreement over how to accomplish this. This section consists of a discussion of two conflicting views on this question. The first can be termed a "content-neutral" view. This view holds that students can become skilled thinkers regardless of which specific topics they study. As long as the subject matter requires them to think hard or "critically," the content is considered to be largely irrelevant. The second view may be considered "content-rich," for it rejects the notion that content doesn't matter and claims that content is a key component of the thinking process.

> **Higher education is no longer invested in the question: Which body of knowledge is essential for all educated people to know in common?**

A Content-Neutral Approach to General Education

Higher education administrators boast that the courses offered at their institutions will train students to be skilled workers and supposed "critical thinkers," but few general education programs require students to study a clearly defined body of knowledge. Higher education is no longer invested in the question: Which body of knowledge is essential for all educated people to know in common? Instead, general education programs are designed with a hyper-focus on teaching generic thinking skills applicable to infinite purposes. The prevailing belief is that students can be trained in the powers of analysis, synthesis, and argumentation by simply engaging in thought-provoking and rigorous coursework.

UNC-Chapel Hill, for example, promises students that regardless of what they study, the institution's general education program will "strengthen your ability to think critically, work collaboratively, and communicate persuasively."[3] And the American Association of Colleges and Universities advocates for a general education model that provides personalized "pathways" for students that equip them with the "proficiencies every student should acquire."[4]

The educational philosophy embodied in these views is "content-neutral" in that which books, lectures, and discussions make up the actual content of students' courses is inconsequential. The cognitive and practical skills learned via the process of taking those courses are what matter, not the knowledge itself. For a content-neutralist, a course on 1800s Cuban colonialism may be just as good as a course on the history of the American Revolution if they both help students develop the desired skill of "historical analysis." As long as courses challenge students to perform the same sorts of mental gymnastics, universities remain comfortably agnostic on questions of content.

In this scenario—the one most prevalent in higher education—universities shirk their authority—and duty—to tell students, "this is what you should learn to be an educated person." Students are not presented with a coherently structured program and must instead navigate their way through hundreds or even thousands of course options. Not only do such programs resemble a "smorgasbord" of disconnected offerings, the courses themselves are often narrow, superficial, or politicized. For example, to satisfy the "Histories, Societies, Individuals" general education requirement at Harvard University, students may take courses such as "American Food: A Global History," "Global Feminisms," or "Moctezuma's Mexico Then and Now: Ancient Empires, Race Mixture and Finding Latinx."[5]

Typical general education programs are not entirely anarchic, however. Most schools have stipulated general education requirements that demand students be familiar with broad areas of knowledge, like math, science, English, and history. These requirements, however, are set up as "distribution requirements." An example of a distribution requirement could be "History." But instead of being required to choose from a limited selection of courses that give them a solid background in the fundamentals of historical knowledge—survey courses on American history or Western civilization—students may choose from numerous, sometimes even hundreds of classes, with no discernable shared subject matter, to fulfill a single distribution requirement.

Not only do such programs resemble a "smorgasbord" of disconnected offerings, the courses themselves are often narrow, superficial, or politicized.

The general education curriculum at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, for example, is divided into seven broad categories including the humanities, social sciences, sciences, and cultural studies.[6] Students have to take six credit hours in the "Humanities & the Arts" category, which is divided into two subcategories: "Historical & Philosophical Perspectives" and "Literature & the Arts." Students only need to take two courses, but there are about 200 courses, "available in the schedule" from which students can choose to meet this requirement.[7] One available course is "Constructing Race in America" in which students learn about how "President Trump capitalized on the racial anxieties [of] a significant portion of white America," "the making of race and white supremacy," and "the gendered contours of race." Other offerings include: "Introduction to Fashion," "Gender & Sexuality in Greco-Roman Antiquity," "Zen," "Intro to Popular TV & Movies," and "Viking Mythology." The list includes some desirable course titles such as "Introduction to Ethics," "Logic and Reasoning," and "Early Masterpieces of Western Culture," but the university leaves it up to the student to decide between "Zen" and "Logic and Reasoning." It is no surprise the university received an "F" rating from the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) in its evaluation of general education programs.[8]

The University of Illinois's general education smorgasbord also extends to the science category. The "Natural Sciences & Technology" requirement is also divided into two subcategories: "Life Sciences" and "Physical Sciences." To fulfill the science requirement, students can choose from a list of about 60 currently offered courses; along with "General Chemistry I" were such fare as "The Science of Food and How it Relates to You," "Race and Environmental Biology," or "The Science of Pets and How to Care for Them."[9]

Consequently, while distribution requirements may impose some structure on students' choices, it is often a very loose structure that allows them wide latitude to "design" their own general education. The end result is often an incoherent and meaningless taste-testing of information that students will likely forget upon graduation, if not before.

And even from a skills-focused standpoint, indifference to the question of knowledge is a serious educational error. Research shows that the *content of students' knowledge* directly impacts their ability to comprehend, analyze, and synthesize information. Parents who want their students to think, write, and communicate clearly and effectively should be concerned about the widespread disregard for transmitting specific and interconnected knowledge.

The university leaves it up to the student to decide between "Zen" and "Logic and Reasoning."

A Content-Rich Approach: Acknowledging the Close Relationship between Facts and Skills

The second perspective addresses the above concerns about the content-neutral approach. Two scholars at the University of Virginia, educational theorist E.D. Hirsch Jr. and cognitive scientist Daniel Willingham, have both published large bodies of work stressing the pivotal role specific factual knowledge plays in the brain's ability to learn new information and develop mental skills such as evidence-based reasoning. The more students know about a related subject— i.e., the more background knowledge, they have—the better they can think, recall information, solve problems, and perform other crucial cognitive functions necessary for learning. Although Hirsch and Willingham come from different professional backgrounds, they arrive at the same conclusion: specific and coherent background knowledge is non-negotiable.

Their findings suggest that higher education's narrow focus on inculcating students with generic thinking skills at the expense of requiring them to learn a defined body of knowledge is deeply misguided. They suggest that the content-neutral approach is not scientifically supported and may stunt student learning. As Willingham notes, "The history of education is littered with abandoned attempts to teach students a skill that will 'train the mind' and help students think more critically about, well, everything."[10] Both authors cite the research of psychologist Edward Thorndike to bolster their claims. Willingham explains how Thorndike's research disproved the notion of broad skills transfer:

> In the 19th century students studied Latin in the hopes that the logical structure of the grammar would make logical thinking habitual. In one of the early (and notable) successes of educational psychology, Edward Thorndike showed that students who took Latin did no better in their other classes than students who didn't. The logic of Latin didn't rub off. The hope of very broad transfer was reignited in the 1960s, when some educational theorists reasoned that computer programming called for logical thinking, as well as the use of some broadly applicable concepts (e.g., recursion). Maybe if kids learned to code, those thinking skills would apply broadly. It works a little better than teaching them Latin, but only a little.[11]

It may be tempting to think that other rigorous activities, such as playing chess or learning a musical instrument, will also make students logical thinkers, but Willingham counters that idea. "Don't teach a different skill in the vain hope that it will burnish some other skill," he argues. "[I]f you want children to think logically about science, teach them how science works. If you want them to learn to evaluate an argument in expository prose, teach that."[12]

Hirsch is similarly critical of the notion that students can be taught generic thinking skills. He employs cognitive psychological research to support his assertion that "problem solving is not a generic skill but is based on the knowledge that you bring to the problem."[13]

It may be tempting to think that other rigorous activities, such as playing chess or learning a musical instrument, will also make students logical thinkers, but Willingham counters that idea.

One research study cited by Hirsch evaluated the ability of novice and master chess players to recreate a midgame chess position after only having seen it for a few seconds. The more experienced chess players were able to recreate the pattern at a much higher rate than the novices. In fact, there was almost a direct correlation between the players' official ranking (level of expertise) and correct placement. According to Hirsch, Dutch chess master and psychologist Adriaan De Groot believed that the grandmasters' superior performances "did not depend on their having developed superior general skills, but rather on… their encyclopedic knowledge of past games, which allowed them to quickly organize their perceptions into meaningful groupings that could then be reconstructed on a blank board."[14]

De Groot's experiment was noticed by Herbert A. Simon—a Carnegie-Mellon political scientist and polymath who was called "one of the giants of cognitive psychology" by Hirsch—who conducted a follow-up study with his colleague William Chase. The subjects in their study (novices, masters, and grandmasters) were asked to recreate random board arrangements with a similar number of more than 20 pieces, but this time the arrangements were not midgame positions but were instead random. The results revealed that all of the subjects, regardless of expertise, could roughly put six pieces in the correct position. "When it came to a brute memory task, equally novel to them all, they all performed as novices," Hirsch commented. He concluded: "There is, then, no general chess-piece reproducing skills, no general mental muscle developed by playing hundreds of chess games."[15]

But why were the chess masters able to consistently recreate the midgame positions in De Groot's experiment?

Hirsch explained that over time their long-term memory "had organized their knowledge into *kinds* of situations and the individual situation of any particular game."[16] Cognitive scientist Paul A. Kirschner and his associates John Sweller and Richard E. Clark tied these and other findings together in a 2006 report:

> Our understanding of the role of long-term memory in human cognition has altered dramatically over the past few decades. It is no longer conceived as a passive repository of discrete, isolated fragments of information that permit us to repeat what we have learned. Nor is it seen only as a component of human cognitive architecture that has merely peripheral influence on complex cognitive processes such as thinking and problem solving. Rather, long-term memory is now viewed as the central, dominant structure of human cognition. Everything we see, hear, and think about is critically dependent on and influenced by our long-term memory.[17]

The more one knows about a particular problem—the more related information they have stored in long-term memory—the better one will be able to reason about it and arrive at a solution. The master chess players had a more robust store of information related to the problem at hand and therefore performed better. Referring to the scientific literature, including the discoveries by De Groot and Simon and Chase, Kirschner et al. concluded:

> We are skillful in an area because our long-term memory contains huge amounts of information concerning the area… Without our huge store of information in long-term memory, we would be largely incapable of everything from simple acts such as crossing a street…[to] solving mathematical problems. Thus, our long-term memory incorporates

> a massive knowledge base that is central to all of our cognitively based activities… The aim of all instruction is to alter long-term memory. If nothing has changed in long-term memory, nothing has been learned.[18]

Swedish psychologist Anders Ericsson echoes Kirschner et. als's observations in his book *Peak: Secrets from the New Science of Expertise:* "A crucial fact about expert performance in general: there is no such thing as developing a general skill. You don't train your memory; you train your memory for strings of digits or collections of words or for people's faces. You don't train to become an athlete; you train to become a gymnast or a sprinter or a marathoner or a swimmer or a basketball player."[19]

If Kirschner et al. and Ericsson are correct, then their conclusions have major implications for higher education—and especially for general education. If everything students think about is "critically dependent on and influenced by" the information they have in long-term memory, then it is imperative to decide with which information their long-term memory is being filled. Educators have to consider which *kinds* of thinkers they wish to produce. If a goal of general education, for example, is to help students understand contemporary issues in light of the past, then students should be taught a broad overview of history. Knowing a little bit about Viking mythology or about gender and sexuality in Greco-Roman Antiquity won't make students generally knowledgeable (and therefore good thinkers) about history; it will only give them narrow glimpses into the past. A random assortment of unconnected facts—much more likely the result of a distribution-style general education program than from one that is organized intentionally—in long-term memory won't make students good general thinkers, it will merely make them "novice" thinkers in a multitude of areas.

A Snapshot of How Thinking Works

To better understand the role long-term memory plays in education, Willingham provides a basic breakdown of how thinking works. It involves two parts of the mind: working memory and long-term memory. Working memory, which can also be considered consciousness, "is the part of your mind where you are aware of what is around you," such as the sound of traffic or the smell of coffee.[20] One can also be conscious of things that aren't currently in one's environment, such as the tune of a favorite song.

Long-term memory, Willingham explains, is "the vast storehouse in which you maintain your factual knowledge of the world: that ladybugs have spots, that your favorite flavor of ice cream is chocolate…"[21] Factual knowledge can also be abstract, such as knowing that a square is a figure with four sides. The knowledge stored in long-term memory "resides outside of awareness." It enters working memory once it is needed to answer a question or make sense of something. A person isn't always consciously thinking about what sound a dog makes, but once asked, the knowledge that "dogs bark" is drawn from long-term memory and enters consciousness or working memory.

This is the context in which thinking takes place. "Thinking occurs when you combine information (from the environment and long-term memory) in new ways. That combining happens in working memory," Willingham explains.[22]

Long-term memory is crucial because it's impossible to be continuously thinking about all the information that one knows. The "space" in working memory is limited. The more one has to juggle concepts or ideas in one's working memory, the more difficult it is to make sense of new information. This

The more one knows about a particular problem—the more related information they have stored in long-term memory—the better one will be able to reason about it and arrive at a solution.

> The more one has to juggle concepts or ideas in one's working memory, the more difficult it is to make sense of new information.

is one way in which having relevant background knowledge aids the thinking process. Consider the following example Willingham provides in his book:[23]

XCN
NPH
DLO
LGM
TFA
QX

To most readers, these combinations of letters are most likely meaningless. It would probably be difficult to memorize these groupings of letters. But if the same list of letters is "chunked" differently, observe what happens:

X
CNN
PHD
LOL
GMT
FAQ
X

Most will recognize easily identifiable acronyms and find the list easier to memorize. This illustrates a cognitive function known as "chunking," which is a way to group information together to make it easier to remember. Chunking is important because it frees up "space" in working memory. In the first example, most people would have to remember a random string of 17 letters. In the second example, chunking significantly reduces the mental load from memorizing 17 elements with no meaning to remembering only seven that have meaning. However, according to Willingham, chunking only works "when you have applicable factual knowledge in long-term memory."[24] People have to know what a "PHD" is if the grouping of letters is to be meaningful. This ability proves very useful in reading comprehension. How? "Background knowledge allows chunking, which makes more room in working memory, which makes it easier to relate ideas, and therefore to comprehend," Willingham explains.[25]

In addition to its importance for cognition, it is easy to see how these concepts apply to sophisticated reading skills. Willingham summarizes other ways background knowledge is necessary for reading comprehension:[26]

- It provides vocabulary.
- It allows you to bridge logical gaps that writers leave.
- It guides the interpretation of ambiguous sentences.

Returning to the chess example, Hirsch reports that Simon and Chase estimated that the master chess players' expertise "derived from the stored memory of about fifty thousand chess games."[27] Simon and Chase didn't suggest that the chess players had fifty thousand individual games stored in their long-term memory—that seems humanly impossible. Rather, each midgame position represents numerous games in which it was employed, and they concluded that the master chess players' success in recreating meaningful chess positions (as opposed to randomly-placed pieces) lay "in their ability to perceive structure in such positions and encode them in chunks."[28]

Another way that background knowledge is vital in education is that the more background knowledge a person has, the better he or she can retain new knowledge about a related area. For example, a person who knows a lot about classical music is more likely to remember new information about that topic than someone who knows less about it. Willingham cites a study by James P. Van Overschelde and Alice F. Healy in which they compared how easily "experts" versus "novices" learned new facts.[29] "The researchers

had people learn either a lot or just a little about subjects that were new to them (for example, Broadway musicals)," Willingham explains.[30] When they had each group read new information related to the topic, the experts "learned new facts more quickly and easily" than the novices.

If a goal of general education is to lay an intellectual foundation for students' future learning, then they must have more than just ad hoc exposure to different areas of knowledge. Like the master chess players, the more students can perceive structure and interrelations in the information they learn, the better they will be able to think through novel problems and retain newly learned information. The process of retrieving information from long-term memory—made easily accessible through chunking— facilitates learning and is key to rigorous thinking.

DEFINING ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE

If learning and thinking are intertwined with specific, content then which information should students be learning in college general education programs? What storehouse of knowledge should they be building in their long-term memory? This section attempts to answer these questions and more.

Which Knowledge is Essential?

Education philosopher E.D. Hirsch argues that students should be taught the knowledge that will provide them with cultural literacy, which he defines as "the network of information that all competent readers possess."[31] This concept is indispensable for learning, reading, and writing (and plays a pivotal role in allowing Americans to communicate and cooperate with one another). To be culturally literate is to have a deep understanding of one's own culture, which he argues is tied to the written word and is very slow to change.

A culturally literate American, according to Hirsch, can read and understand "newspapers of substance."[32] That is because high-quality books and newspapers assume that their audience "knows the things known by other literate persons in the culture."[33] While learning about other cultural traditions can be valuable, it should not be the primary focus of general education. Hirsch writes, "To teach the ways of one's own community has always been and still remains the essence of the education of our children, who enter neither a narrow tribal culture nor a transcendent world culture but a national literate culture."[34]

Hirsch offers an example of mainstream versus less-conventional knowledge. Most Americans are familiar with Abraham Lincoln. Few Americans—other than historians and political scientists—know much about New Hampshire congressman and later twice-elected governor Onslow Stearns (who was in politics during Lincoln's presidency).[35] Therefore, Hirsch would argue that it's more important to be familiar with Lincoln than with Stearns. In the appendix of his book, Hirsch includes a list of thousands of terms and facts that he and a group of educators consider to constitute cultural knowledge. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that it is surely imperfect and should be revised and updated as additions or subtractions are needed in light of cultural change.

Chunking is important because it frees up "space" in working memory.

A skeptic might say that Hirsch's views are applicable to K-12 education, but the goals of cultural literacy don't apply to the higher education setting. In college, students aren't merely aiming to become "competent readers" but are undertaking advanced studies. This objection, however, is misguided because students' storehouse of background knowledge isn't "filled" once they complete high school. If colleges are to promote competent, literate thinkers, then the work of gaining generalist knowledge must continue, albeit

at a higher level. While he wrote *Cultural Literacy* with K-12 education in mind, Hirsch's underlining point is still applicable to the college setting: students need to gain a "national vocabulary" that will make them better participants in the culture in which they live.[36]

Hirsch notes that the knowledge that makes up mainstream literate culture is very slow to change, although changes certainly do occur. Cultural knowledge isn't static. Different periods introduce new ideas and figures that are at the time very important to mainstream communication, but their importance often fades with the passage of time. These are what Hirsch refers to as less the "stable" elements of cultural knowledge. They are less likely to persist past their initial prominence. The stable elements are the ones that have endured for many years. He cites George Washington, the Gettysburg Address, *Hamlet*, and the Declaration of Independence as examples of the stable elements that "belong at the educational core."[37]

Hirsch's framework is a promising first stab at the question of "*Which* knowledge should be taught?" It begins to fall short, however, the more he explains the rationale behind his criteria for which knowledge is essential. For Hirsch, the information required for cultural literacy is important merely because it is the information that happens to be mainstream. Indeed, he argues that prioritizing specifically American cultural knowledge has "nothing to do with inherent merit, only with the accidents of culture."[38] Rather, he condemns the notion that any one cultural tradition has any inherent merit.[39]

If colleges are to promote competent, literate thinkers, then the work of gaining generalist knowledge must continue, albeit at a higher level.

Yet, while American cultural knowledge is necessary to be a functioning, literate member of our civic society, it is not enough. A hypothetical country can help illustrate this point. Suppose there is a country in which most of the laws are unjust, the rulers are tyrants, the literature, films, and music are degenerate, and basic survival depends on citizens looking out only for themselves. Being "culturally literate" in the stable and persistent elements of the mainstream culture of this country is far from desirable. Even if such knowledge facilitates basic communication, it is unlikely to lead to good outcomes for the individual or for society. This is because culture must have a sound moral basis and not all ideas are equally thoughtful, coherent, or intellectually stimulating. Cultural relativism is a faulty philosophy. Ideas matter.

Hirsch avoids dealing with the full repercussions of his argument because much of the mainstream culture, especially in the 1980s when he emerged into national prominence, was still largely traditional. It is safe to say that the knowledge of traditional culture—which is overwhelmingly Western— is even less generally shared today. The stable elements of mainstream culture that typically are slow to change can disappear at lightning speed if schools fail to pass on cultural knowledge. Based on the direction many schools are taking, it's entirely possible that over time, the dominant body of "mainstream knowledge" will be completely unrecognizable from what it is today—and not in a good way.

Hirsch himself recognized in his 1987 book that one of the causes of cultural illiteracy is the fact that people have taken the knowledge they have for granted.[40] But by arguing that knowledge traditions do not have any inherent merit, Hirsch took, perhaps unwittingly, the mainstream traditional culture for granted.

New York University professor of communication Neil Postman recognized the need for a country's shared assumptions to have a deeper foundation than the mere fact that they happen to be mainstream. In a criticism directed at Hirsch, Postman said "Modern secular education is failing not because it doesn't teach who Ginger Rogers, Norman Mailer, and a thousand other people are but because it has no moral, social, or intellectual center."[41] Like Hirsch, he agreed that education helps create "a public" or a common culture, but he took that as a given. The real question, he argued, is not "Does or doesn't public schooling create a public? The question is, What kind of public does it create?"[42]

Postman raised an important question. Today's college campuses are heavily invested in teaching students to view social and political issues through a prism of the "diversity, equity, and inclusion" agenda. Through coursework and university-wide initiatives, universities seem intent on inculcating students with a particular set of moral beliefs and assumptions. They go to extreme lengths to recruit faculty and staff who share these same beliefs and assumptions—often through the use of political litmus tests disguised as "diversity statements."[43] They even work to disseminate these beliefs and assumptions into the wider culture. These institutions, in other words, strive to build education around a definitive moral center. This "moral center," however, is hardly part of the nation's traditional or prevailing morality; indeed, it stands in opposition to it. It suppresses the search for truth for the sake of advancing highly questionable and dogmatic views on race, gender, social relations, and history. Proponents of this "woke" moral vision believe that this country's history and social institutions are fundamentally racist and sexist, that a man can become a woman, that people should be evaluated based on their skin color rather than on their merits, and that it's permissible to discriminate against some people but not others.

Expressing views contrary to this vision is not tolerated—even if the objections are well-formulated and backed by evidence. It is not concerned with evidence because its tenets are beyond question; it operates as a quasi-sacred belief system that doesn't need to be scrutinized and debated but accepted and affirmed. Dissidents are shamed, intimidated, and often punished.[44] Such an educational center is not only pernicious and liable to raise an angry and vindictive generation, it undermines colleges' academic mission by disdaining reason, discouraging open inquiry, and silencing dissent.

It is not enough, then, for people to have knowledge, purpose, and values in common. As Postman suggested, education reformers must consider the *kind* of knowledge, purpose, and values that are desirable for students to have in common. Educators must consider the quality of thinkers produced, the personal value of the knowledge gained to the individual, as well as the effects on society. If universities are to create thinkers capable of rational depth and systematic thought beyond familiarity with prevailing fads and conventions, if students are to find more personal and intellectual meaning from their general education experience than having checked a series of boxes, and if the country is to be truly moral, wise, and just, then the meaning, values, and ideals contained in the information matter.

With these three goals in mind—producing good thinkers, good human beings, and a healthy society—the content of general education programs should largely consist of a coherent survey of the works, discoveries, and history of Western civilization.

Cultural relativism is a faulty philosophy. Ideas matter.

Why the Western Canon

A course of study centered around the West is uniquely capable of satisfying three central aims of general education. For one, it provides students with a coherent and rigorous body of cultural knowledge. The West has either generated or incorporated almost all advancements—both intellectual and technical—from the dawn of civilization to today. To study the West is to study a centuries-long conversation that presents students with the gradual development and interconnectedness of human knowledge. Secondly, it cultivates the civic and humanistic values and habits of mind necessary for responsible citizenship and leadership. Third, knowledge of their cultural roots helps students understand themselves as Americans, which in turn promotes social unity. A people as religiously, intellectually, and culturally diverse as Americans are today needs to be united in a common purpose and cultural identity. As the social fabric becomes increasingly frayed through heightened political tensions, it is particularly urgent for Americans to recover a sense of cultural unity, which can be facilitated by a shared appreciation of Western heritage. This section will explore these reasons in further depth.

1. *The Western canon allows students to understand the history of mankind's greatest ideas and achievements and bring them to bear on contemporary problems.*

The story of the West is a story of ideas. Knowledge of the West is to have a comprehensive, coherent, and meaningful introduction to mankind's most important thought. Studying a smattering of subjects without understanding the broader intellectual-cultural framework into which they fit is to be, in the words of the National Association of Scholars president Peter Wood, "blind to the underlying order and interconnections of these subjects."[45]

According to Columbia University's English and American Studies professor Roosevelt Montás, not only is Western civilization "the seedbed for the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the Scientific Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, and much of what we call 'modernity,'"[46] but it is also an integrated textual "lineage of literary, philosophical, and artistic reflections stretching as far back as Homer and the pre-Socratic philosophers."[47]

Education reformers must consider the *kind* of knowledge, purpose, and values that are desirable for students to have in common.

In such an idea-centered curriculum, students will grapple with scientific thought from Thales of Miletus to today's cutting-edge researchers. Such exposure will allow students to witness how scientific knowledge has been built over the millennia and will prompt them to consider contemporary problems in light of this sweeping picture. It will also introduce them to some of the richest philosophical and literary works such as Plato's *Republic* and Dante's *Divine Comedy* and give them a working timeline of history's major events. They will see firsthand that the canon is far from ideologically uniform, but rather a repository of dialogues and disagreements about the most pressing questions.

At the conclusion of their studies, students may realize how previous nations and cultures resembled and shaped the contemporary world. Questions concerning the nature of freedom, justice, and truth were asked at the dawn of Western civilization and continue to be analyzed and debated from every angle today. The relentless pursuit of truth contained in the Western tradition—with all its tensions and debates—not only provides perspective but connects the ancient man to the earnest student of today.

2. *The Western canon contains models of human excellence.*

Higher education has several laudable goals. It aims, for one, to prepare students for life in the real world by teaching them basic skills they will need for employment. A well-designed curriculum should help students be better thinkers, writers, and communicators. It should also make them competent—even excellent—at performing the tasks required of their chosen field of expertise. As worthwhile as these goals are, education offers students more than marketable skills. The value of education shouldn't always be reduced to its mere "usefulness." There are other unquantifiable goods that make higher education worth pursuing.

Another goal of a university education is to direct students toward the unquantifiable goods of human excellence, civic virtue, and the pursuit of truth. This goal was expressed by John Adams in the 1779 Massachusetts Constitution when he argued that widespread virtue was critical for the nation's survival and that this was dependent on education. To Adams, education, including higher education, was a means to "inculcate the principles of humanity and general benevolence, public and private charity, industry and frugality, honesty and punctuality in their dealings, sincerity, good humour, and all social affections,

and generous sentiments among the people."[48] This is why he stated that legislators and magistrates have a duty to "cherish the interests of literature and the sciences" and the "seminaries" or institutions where they were housed.

The virtues that Adams listed can help someone be a productive worker, but their value goes beyond that. They are about forming good, civically responsible, and wise humans. It is reasonable to assume that the education Adams had in mind largely consisted of the "literature and the sciences" contained in the Western intellectual tradition. He was an ardent reader of Western thinkers such as Plato, Thucydides, Shakespeare, Newton, Euclid, and Jonathan Swift.[49] In addition, classical subject matter dominated college curricula during the colonial period. Adams—and many of his contemporaries—appeared to regard the study of great ideas and works as conducive to forming good citizens.

It is not hard to see how such an education can help students meaningfully direct their lives. The Great Conversation of the West probes, from more angles and more profoundly than any other tradition, questions of perennial value such as the purpose of life, the character of virtue, vice, and happiness, the nature of reality, and whether there is objective truth. A study of Aristotle, for example, will immediately ask students to address a timeless question head-on: what is the good? In drawing on what the poet Matthew Arnold described as "the best which has been thought and said," students are prompted to seriously think through these questions for themselves.[50]

The relentless pursuit of truth contained in the Western tradition—with all its tensions and debates—not only provides perspective but connects the ancient man to the earnest student of today.

Students under a curriculum of this sort are exposed not just to "mainstream" content, but to mind- and character-forming content. This kind of content is most often found in the humanities. Former Yale law school dean Anthony Kronman, in his book *The Assault on American Excellence*, argues that the humanities "put the question of the meaning of life at the center of attention," and refers to them as "an education in human excellence."[51] Kronman notes that he's had many students who have reported experiences "of an existential sort" after reading texts such as Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*.

"These are only anecdotes," Kronman concedes, "but they illustrate and validate my confidence that the humanities do more than add to one's storehouse of knowledge—that they stretch and strengthen the students' human being too."[52] He continues:

> They confirm that a person's humanity can grow: that there are grades and distinctions of human fulfillment in the life of a single person and between the lives of different ones as well. They justify the conviction that better and worse, if not, perhaps, the unequivocal best, is a notion that has application beyond the realm of specific tasks, like flute playing, in the all-encompassing work of being human.[53]

Education as a means of becoming a more excellent human is not new. The Renaissance humanists of the 1300s, for instance, believed that the study of ancient Greek and Roman texts would improve people's moral character and would therefore help remedy the civilizational crisis that Italy and Europe were going through. Pointing to the Renaissance humanists' example, Harvard historian James Hankins suggests the country's current social ills could be improved by a return to a humanistic understanding of education. According to Hankins:

> The humanist literati of the Renaissance, beginning with Petrarch, taught that the humanities can provide the moral discipline or soulcraft that is needed to produce the kind of rulers and citizens necessary for successful government. The humanities—rightly understood, taught, and practiced as a way of life—can cultivate human moral and intellectual excellence, the qualities our tradition refers to as virtue.[54]

Possession of knowledge by no means guarantees that students will be good or virtuous. Adams, for example, recognized that "There is no necessary connection between Knowledge and Virtue. Simple Intelligence has no essential Association with Morality."[55] If one does not have a conscience, one cannot be moral no matter the level of knowledge he may possess. There have been many highly educated tyrants throughout human history. Nevertheless, Adams stated that "My humble Opinion is that Knowledge upon the whole promotes Virtue and happiness."[56]

How does knowledge of the Western canon—and considering its questions related to the meaning of life—promote "virtue" and "happiness"? For one thing, a greater understanding of the world—and a greater investment in getting to the truth—can encourage people to be guided by their reason instead of their passions or appetites. Such an education, then, has the potential to help students correctly order their psyche, life-habits, or soul. Princeton philosophy professor Robert P. George argues that true freedom consists in the self-mastery that results when reason governs the appetites:

> [O]ur critical engagement with great thinkers enriches our understanding and enables us to grasp, or grasp more fully, great truths—truths that, when we appropriate them and integrate them into our lives, liberate us from what is merely vulgar, coarse, or base. These are soul-shaping, humanizing truths—truths whose appreciation and secure possession elevates reason above passion or appetite, enabling us to direct our desires and our wills to what is truly good, truly beautiful, truly worthy of human beings as possessors of a profound and inherent dignity.[57]

John Adams would no doubt be horrified to see which kinds of "knowledge" many of today's students are learning at publicly funded institutions. Today's intellectually malnourished students, who can easily forgo enriching coursework in exchange for superficial and politicized content, are unlikely to be undertaking the kind of education that will teach them the "principles of humanity and general benevolence" Adams described. On the contrary, the prevalence in university curricula of divisive and ideologically charged ideas sows resentment and discord where Adams envisioned the cultivation of "all social affections, and generous sentiments among the people." During a time when students should be undertaking the serious work of forming and refining their civic and moral attitudes, they are bombarded by general education curricula endorsing sexual license, tribalism, and resentment.

A serious curriculum founded on the Western tradition can help redirect students to the path of human, moral, and intellectual excellence of which Adams, Kronman, Hankins, and George speak.

3. The Western canon contains the specific ideas that are necessary for students to understand themselves as Americans — liberty, natural rights, republicanism, democracy, and constitutional theory. This shared cultural knowledge promotes social unity.

What is an American? What binds us together? The United States today is highly diverse, perhaps more so than any nation that has ever existed. There are immense pressures that divide us. Polls and recent elections show a high degree of political polarization. In an age of seemingly limitless choice, young people tend to divide themselves into various "tribes" and subcultures socially. And from an early age, they are segregated from other generations.

If our country is to pull together as one people, it can only be through education—a point also made by Hirsch.[58] Fortunately, a focus on Western thought has the potential to accomplish this goal. The cultural literacy derived from the Western Tradition will ideally not just help the individual student navigate his

or her contemporary world more effectively: it should also produce better citizens with an understanding of the values definitive of the American project. And to the extent that an increasingly large share of young Americans pursues postsecondary education—and, by doing so, are likely to achieve positions of importance in society—general education has a crucial role in propagating the shared American values that are needed for social unity.

Many of the key ideas and discoveries developed throughout Western history, such as natural rights, natural law, concepts of liberty, and the pursuit of the good are visible in the founding documents. These concepts form the very foundation of American democracy. General education should be, in large part, about communicating these formative ideas to future generations of Americans, uniting them in a common purpose and understanding.

The Founding Fathers recognized that the new nation's survival was dependent on its people drawing from a common body of knowledge and values. This education wasn't just intended for schoolchildren but was also considered necessary at the higher education level. That is why some of the founders dreamed of establishing a national university, including George Washington. He believed that in such a university, "the arts, Sciences, and Belles lettres, could be taught in their *fullest* extent," which would give Americans "the means of acquiring the liberal knowledge which is necessary to qualify our citizens for the exigencies of public, as well as private life."[59] Upon his death, George Washington left a large sum of money for the establishment of a national university, which he envisioned would strengthen the country's unity by spreading "systemactic [sic] ideas through all parts of this rising Empire…"[60]

Adams would no doubt be horrified to see which kinds of "knowledge" many of today's students are learning at publicly funded institutions.

James Madison even proposed including the establishment of a national university in the U.S. Constitution, arguing that it would help diffuse "those national feelings, those liberal sentiments, and those congenial manners which contribute cement to our Union and strength to the great political fabric of which that is the foundation."[61] George Thomas, professor of government at Claremont McKenna College, reports in his book *The Founders and the Idea of a National University: Constituting the American Mind* that "the creation of a national university was supported by every president from Washington to John Quincy Adams—and would be put forward by later presidents such as Ulysses S. Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes, and James A. Garfield—and was frequently advocated by the nascent republic's educational thinkers."[62] Although a national university never materialized, it underscores how they believed the health of the nation rested on shared education at the college level.

Noah Webster, known as the "Father of American Scholarship and Education," the author of what is now called *Webster's Dictionary*, and an important journalist in the early days of our nation, also saw education as a necessary unitive force for the country. He stressed that Americans' minds should have a good grasp of both the sciences and the principles and ideas upon which their country is based:

> [I]t is an object of vast magnitude that systems of Education should be adopted and pursued, which may not only diffuse a knowledge of the sciences, but may implant, in the minds of the American youth, the principles of virtue and of liberty; and inspire them with just and liberal ideas of government, and with an inviolable attachment to their own country.[63]

In "liberal ideas of government," Webster clearly had in mind that students should be well-versed in the political philosophy that inspired the country's founding.

In addition to giving students the intellectual tools to be good citizens, such cultural knowledge promotes social cohesion. In today's polarized times, many Americans dislike one another, distrust their leaders, and often exhibit scorn for the country. Civic ignorance is abysmally high. Patriotism is diminishing: in a 2023 Gallup poll, only 18 percent of 18 to 35 year-olds said they were extremely proud to be an American.[64] Last year, only 38 percent of U.S. adults said they were extremely proud to be an American, "the lowest in Gallup's trend, which began in 2001."[65]

A citizenry that draws from the same common base of ideas and values is necessary for social unity. This reality was observed by Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*:

> [T]here is no society that can prosper without such beliefs, or rather there is none that could survive this way; for without common ideas there is no common action, and without common action men still exist, but a social body does not. Thus, in order that there be society, and all the more, that this society prosper, it is necessary that all the minds of the citizens always be brought and held together by some principal ideas…[66]

Tocqueville was impressed with America's ability to provide an education that was both enlightening and encouraged civic responsibility: "One cannot doubt that in the United States the instruction of the people serves powerfully to maintain a democratic republic. It will be so, I think, everywhere that the instruction that enlightens the mind is not separated from the education that regulates mores."[67]

The Founding Fathers recognized that the new nation's survival was dependent on its people drawing from a common body of knowledge and values.

But somehow, the unifying education described by Tocqueville has disappeared in the nearly two centuries since he wrote about it. General education programs are so loosely structured with such a proliferation of course options that students are very unlikely to learn a common body of knowledge. Furthermore, many schools do not even require students to study basic American history or government. Today's college education has become so "separated from the education that regulates mores" that Tocqueville's admiration for American education would likely turn to disgust.

Students' general education, organized in a manner that exposes them to the intellectual and cultural treasury of the Western canon, provides the web of interconnected background knowledge necessary for learning while ensuring that the content itself is rigorous, meaningful, and conducive to human and societal flourishing. The West is not only an optimal organizing principle, but it provides an antidote to the intellectual and moral malaise engulfing modern day academia.

PART III: THE EVOLUTION OF GENERAL EDUCATION

General education did not exist as a concept in American colleges when the nation was founded. It emerged as a corrective force against the overspecialization and over-professionalization that began to dominate higher education in the late 19th century. Its proponents wished to reassert the importance of teaching commonly shared cultural knowledge that had been essentially the whole of a college education before the 19th century drive toward specialization and scientific investigation.

American Higher Education at the Founding

Higher education curricula looked very different in the early years of this country. Unlike the system of majors, electives, and general education that characterizes modern-day curricula, education in early American colleges was a prescribed curriculum of courses that gave students little, if any, freedom to decide what they studied. In the Colonial era, college curricula consisted almost entirely of classical subject matter, which required knowledge of Latin and ancient Greek. Furthermore, curricula included non-classical subjects such as logic and metaphysics that were inherited from the medieval scholastics.

Christian themes and perspectives were also central to a college education; many schools opened specifically for the purpose of training ministers, and higher education was largely seen as a moralizing and cultural force. Classics professor Eric Adler contends that early American colleges viewed their primary goal as "the moral improvement of their students through the inculcation of ancient wisdom."[68]

The Birth of the Modern University

Yet this common approach to education was not to last. Innovations appeared soon after the United States became an independent nation. Thomas Jefferson seemed ahead of his time by proposing an elective system in anticipation of the opening of the University of Virginia (UVA) in 1825. Jefferson, who was deeply invested in the advancement of scientific knowledge, imagined a university at which students would have greater freedom to choose their coursework. UVA, however, did not allow students full freedom to customize their studies. Instead, students were permitted to select which school within the university they wished to attend and took that school's prescribed curriculum.[69]

Later in the 19th century, driven by the growing influence of industrialization and the rise of the German research university, radically different conceptions of higher education emerged. Especially important was high-level vocational education, which was concerned with the development of a set of skills for employment, and research-oriented education, which concentrated on the production of new knowledge. These innovations signaled a dramatic shift from the humanistic-centered view of education that had dominated since the Renaissance.

German universities were particularly influential on their American counterparts. In the mid-19th century, the University of Berlin was characterized by a focus on scientific research, technology, and mathematics and specialized scholarship. The German university introduced the idea of an elective curriculum, a "curricular-free-for-all," as Adler describes it. The system gave students significant freedom to design their courses of study. This novel approach, Adler argues, "signaled to admirers of German higher education that the fixed curriculum… could be usefully abandoned."[70]

The number of colleges in the US increased throughout the 19th century, as well as the number of faculty. Philosopher and independent scholar Alston Chase noted that the greater number of faculty "accelerated the trend toward specialization, tempting and enabling students to specialize earlier."[71] The elective system with its lack of curricular constraints was attractive to both faculty and students who wanted freedom to develop within their chosen disciplines.

Also important for setting higher education down this new path was the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862. The legislation gave each state public land to sell in order to establish and support colleges that offered mechanical and agricultural training. Only ten per cent of the proceeds from the sales could be used to purchase a site for a college. Instead, the remaining funds had to go toward an endowment "invested at a return of 5 percent."[72] In each state, the endowment's purpose was to support:

> At least one college where the leading object shall be, without excluding other scientific and classical studies, and including military tactics, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts, in such a manner as the legislatures of the States may respectively prescribe, in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes on the several pursuits and professions in life.[73]

Roger Geiger, a professor of education at Pennsylvania State University, notes in his book *The History of American Higher Education* that the act "immediately affected the expansion and structure of higher education,"[74] and historian Frederick Rudolph credited the Morrill Act with significantly changing Americans' attitudes towards college.[75]

The Act was interpreted and applied differently in the various states. Geiger explains that "land grant funds provided only income, the states were responsible for supplying a college."[76] He adds that "each state found a unique solution to creating a land grant college." Some states directed the funds to an established state university. This was the case in Wisconsin and in much of the South. At the time, some states such as New York and California didn't have a state university and consequently Cornell (founded in 1865) and the University of California (founded in 1868) were created as the "land-grant designee[s]."

Other institutions created as land grant designees included Illinois Industrial University (founded in 1867, now the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign) and Ohio Agricultural and Mechanical College (founded in 1870, now Ohio State University). Geiger writes that some states didn't think their universities could properly "accommodate applied subjects" and instead created distinct Agricultural and Mechanical (A&M) colleges.[77]

But it was not only public institutions that were created in the spirit of the modern university. The ultra-wealthy industrialists of the so-called "Gilded Age" in the late 1800s also founded private schools with similar intentions (often giving them their own names, such as Stanford University and Carnegie Technical School—now Carnegie Mellon University).

Johns Hopkins University was perhaps the most influential of such schools. Closely modeled on the German university, it opened in 1876 and with it the country's first graduate school. Michael Bisesi, a former Associate Dean at the University of Houston, noted that the opening of Johns Hopkins "led to an increased influence of the department and facilitated 'the great proliferation of courses'" through a less-restricted elective system.[78] It also introduced the concept of academic majors and minors. Adler notes that "by 1910, most US colleges and universities had adopted" the major-minor system.[79]

Cornell University (New York's land-grant university) also embraced the elective system; it had "an almost completely unrestricted" elective system by 1896.[80] At Harvard, starting in 1869, president Charles Eliot championed the elective system so ardently that by 1897, all prescribed coursework at Harvard was eliminated except for an introductory rhetoric course.[81]

The Education of Specialists: "Atom-Sized in Their Souls"

The rise of the elective system, however, presented a new set of problems. In the rush of enthusiasm of higher education leaders to meet the changing needs of the times, the resulting curricula lacked coherence and failed to provide students with a common basis of knowledge. Frederick Rudolph suggested that there was a keen feeling at that time that institutions "had lost touch with the ideal of learning as a body of thought and values by which an educated man was identified."[82] Many considered the elective system the main culprit for this loss.

The Nobel Prize-winning novelist John Steinbeck commented on this tension between broad and specialist education in his novel *East of Eden*, which is set at the turn of the 20th century. In the novel, Adam Trask, the central protagonist, comments to his son that "the times are changed. A boy must be a specialist or he will get nowhere. I guess that's why I'm so glad you're going to college… I know a little bit about a great many things and not enough about any one of them to make a living in these times." He continued, "Old Sam Hamilton saw this coming. He said there couldn't be any more universal philosophers. The weight of knowledge is too great for one mind to absorb. He saw a time when one man would know only one little fragment, but he would know it well."[83]

Trask's remark is followed by a debate with a servant-turned-family-friend about whether this is a positive development in education. The friend retorts, "Maybe the knowledge is too great and maybe men are growing too small… Maybe, kneeling down to atoms, they're becoming atom-sized in their souls. Maybe a specialist is only a coward, afraid to look out of his little cage. And think what any specialist misses— the whole world over his fence."[84]

It was this sentiment, that modern specialized students were missing out on the whole world of human knowledge and suffering the moral and intellectual consequences of its absence, that appalled a number of early 20th century educators. Some of those educators included former Columbia College dean John Howard Van Amringe, philosopher and former president of Amherst College Alexander Meiklejohn, and former University of Chicago president Robert Maynard Hutchins. Van Amringe argued that the college's purpose was to "make men," not specialists.[85]

Meiklejohn called Charles Eliot's elective system at Harvard a "kind of intellectual bankruptcy," adding that "It is an announcement that (college teachers) have no guiding principles in their educational practice, no principles of selection in their arrangement of study, no genuine grasp of the relationship between knowledge and life."[86] He saw general education as "a corrective to the assumptions of specialization."

Hutchins likewise criticized the curricular-free-for-all at Harvard and the notion of setting students free to roam the curricular landscape unimpeded by prescriptive restraints: "This overlooks the fact that the aim of education is to connect man with man, to connect the present with the past, and to advance the thinking" of mankind.[87] He continued, "If this is the aim of education, it cannot be left to the sporadic, spontaneous interests of children or even of undergraduates."

Eliot's successor at Harvard, Abbott Lawrence Lowell, recognized the deficiencies of the elective system. After becoming president in 1909, Lowell replaced the elective system with a "system of 'concentration and distribution'"[88] which allowed students to choose an assortment of courses from each of the major areas of knowledge.[89] This provided more structure than the elective system, but students still often took a miscellaneous array of courses. Earl James McGrath, a Commissioner of Education under presidents Truman and Eisenhower, argued in 1946 that the disorganization of Lowell's distribution system produced graduates who couldn't competently think and communicate with one another: "Communication and united action on any of the major problems of their time are difficult," he stated.[90] Nevertheless, Lowell's distribution system over time proved influential and is the primary model of general education used today.[91]

Columbia University and the Beginning of General Education

The growing concern about the negative aspects of elective and specialized education prompted additional schools to consider modifying their curricula. As Frederick Rudolph noted in his book *The American College and University: A History*, "the general education movement… was an attempt to capture some of the sense of a continuing intellectual and spiritual heritage that had fallen victim to the elective principle."[92] He added that "the movement marked a halt in the tendency toward specialization, as well as a new respect for the concepts of education as the mark of a gentleman and a passport to human understanding."

Columbia College is commonly regarded as the pioneer in the movement to restore general studies to higher learning, due in large part to the creation of a required course for all freshmen. The course, "Contemporary Civilization," evolved from a military course that the government asked colleges to teach to rally patriotism during World War I. Historian Daniel Bell stated, "On behalf of the Students' Army Training Corps, which

had been established in colleges throughout the country, the government asked Columbia to prepare a course in 'War Issues'… After it was approved in Washington, the course was given at Columbia and at all other Student Corps centers."[93] Although the course stressed military and political events, it caused some to realize the benefits of a prescribed shared curriculum that addressed the "problems of the contemporary world."[94] At the time the War Issues course was being taught at Columbia, some faculty called for the establishment of a course on "Peace Issues."

With the close of WWI, the War Issues course, which had been a great success, was replaced by the Contemporary Civilization course in 1919. It had a heavy emphasis on history and was designed for the whole student body to take. Biesi noted that the dean of Columbia College at the time (mathematician Herbert E. Hawkes) stated that the course's purpose was to "introduce into our education a liberalizing force which will give to the generations to come a common background of ideas and commonly understood standards of judgment."[95] According to Columbia history professor Harry Carman (who later became dean of Columbia College), "In introducing the general survey course… Columbia has operated on the assumption that it is not the fundamental business of the College to turn out specialists in a narrow field, and that an individual is, after all, not well educated unless he or she has at least some conception of the broad field of intellectual endeavor."[96] Columbia would later add two other survey courses required for all students that focused on the humanities and the sciences. All three courses (which eventually became two-year courses) were required of all students.[97]

The growing concern about the negative aspects of elective and specialized education prompted additional schools to consider modifying their curricula.

A predecessor to the humanities sequence at Columbia was English professor John Erskine's 1917 proposal for a General Honors course, in which students would read a classic work a week. (Erskine later became the first president of the Juilliard School of Music and helped inspire the Great Books movement.) Bell notes that Erskine's motivations were three-fold: to "inculcate in the student a humanistic rather than a professional orientation," to have them grapple directly with great works, and "'to acculturate'" students into the "'great traditions.'"[98] In 1920, Erskine's vision was realized in an optional two-year General Honors course centered on the Great Books.[99]

By establishing this course of study, with its civic and humanistic emphases, Columbia was pushing back "against the German tradition of the university, with its 'professional' emphasis."[100] The new Contemporary Civilization course, according to a Columbia committee in 1946, "was the beginning of a quiet and gradual revolution in undergraduate instruction throughout the United States."[101]

During the years between the two world wars, the "revolution" was indeed gradual and quiet. Inspired at least in part by Columbia's return to teaching a common core of knowledge, a handful of colleges considered requiring introductory courses that would familiarize students with a broad overview of Western culture. But Chase reported that, by 1945, most "American colleges and universities had not… converted to general studies." Instead, perhaps inspired by Lowell's Harvard, an elective-heavy curriculum with some distribution requirements characterized most interwar curricula.[102]

One school that promoted a strictly prescribed curriculum was an experimental college within the University of Wisconsin-Madison established in 1925 by Alexander Meiklejohn in which there were no electives.[103] Meiklejohn sought to promote a generalist education by placing "stress in introductory courses on what is important for everyone to know, whether academically-minded or not, and regardless of vocational destination."[104] The program, however, only lasted for five years.

Another was the University of Chicago. In the 1930s, President Robert Maynard Hutchins spearheaded a curriculum with a heavy emphasis on Great Books. And Saint John's College's (Annapolis, MD) Great Books program was founded by Stringfellow Barr and Scott Buchanan in 1937.

Dewey, Progressivism, Columbia Education School, and Educational Formalism

Ironically, Columbia also spawned ideas that greatly contributed to the general education movement's eventual decline. In the first three decades of the 20th century at Columbia, philosopher and education theorist John Dewey helped spread the popularity of educational progressivism. Heavily influenced by French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Dewey believed in catering education to students' abilities, needs, and desires rather than demanding that they master traditional content. Dewey stressed the utility of education and the direct application of knowledge to practical acts, seeking to replace "bookish" learning with "material that is directly experienced and immediately useful to life in society."[105]

Dewey's work embodied what E.D. Hirsch termed educational "formalism," defined as "the theory that any suitable content will inculcate reading, writing, and thinking skills." Hirsch argued that Dewey's great influence and the growth of romantic formalism in educational theory are responsible for the fragmentation of school curricula.[106] "Believing that a few direct experiences would suffice to develop the skills that children require, Dewey assumed that early education need not be tied to specific content," Hirsch explained. Such a perspective undercuts general education's original purpose: to supply students with a store of shared essential knowledge intended to make them more human and better citizens. Dewey's vision ran counter to the notion that Columbia's "Contemporary Civilization" course was designed to advance, namely that "there is a certain minimum of… [the Western] intellectual and spiritual tradition that a man must experience and understand if he is to be called educated."[107]

The seeds of educational formalism planted at Columbia Teachers College later wreaked havoc on general education programs.

Post-World War II: The Golden Age of Education

General education programs become popular as a means to transmit a common culture in the era immediately after World War II; that period may even be called the "Golden Age of General Education." The world war and the Great Depression had left their marks; Chase wrote that "the test of national survival galvanized the nation, bringing people together and making cooperation both on and off campus possible."[108] Cold War tensions, he noted, "cemented the generally held conviction that citizenship cannot be taken for granted, but must be taught." Writing in 1976, Earl James McGrath, a Commissioner of Education, noted the growing enthusiasm for general education and estimated that "half of the colleges in the nation" were brought "into its sphere of influence by 1955."[109]

The desire to infuse curricula with cultural knowledge and civic values swept across the country, a sentiment that Chase argued was reflected in a six-volume 1947 report by the President's Commission on Higher Education (appointed by President Harry Truman). Entitled "Higher Education for American Democracy," the report asserted that too many college programs were not properly preparing students to be good workers and citizens "in large part because the unity of liberal education has been splintered by over-specialization."[110] The report lamented that the

Ironically, Columbia also spawned ideas that greatly contributed to the general education movement's eventual decline.

professionalized students being produced by these institutions lacked "that human wholeness and civic conscience which the cooperative activities of citizenship require."[111] It highlighted the need for common values and knowledge:

> The failure to provide any core of unity in the essential diversity of higher education is a cause for grave concern. A society whose members lack a body of common experience and common knowledge is a society without a fundamental culture; it tends to disintegrate into a mere aggregation of individuals. Some community of values, ideas, and attitudes is essential as a cohesive force in this age of minute division of labor and intense conflict of special interests. The crucial task of higher education today, therefore, is to provide a unified general education for American youth. Colleges must find the right relationship between specialized training on the one hand, aiming at a thousand different careers, and the transmission of a common cultural heritage toward a common citizenship on the other.[112]

Much of general education's postwar proliferation can be attributed to the attention paid to it by important institutions. One was Harvard, which issued a major report on the topic in 1945. The report, which Bisesi called "one of the best known attempts at general education," was issued by a committee created by then-president James B. Conant. "General Education in a Free Society," commonly known as the "Redbook" for its red cover, was written in response to the concern that too many undergraduates were specializing and not receiving an education in the Western tradition. This overspecialization was fueled by Harvard's own incoherent general education program. A Harvard Committee writing in 1964, noted that, before 1945, the university had a "rather complex" distribution requirement system that "was both difficult to understand and easy to evade." The Committee added that the system was so unstructured that "almost any collection of courses would meet the requirement."[113]

The desire to infuse curricula with cultural knowledge and civic values swept across the country.

The Redbook acknowledged the importance of specialization for the technological advancement of society, but it also held that a "society controlled wholly by specialists is not a wisely ordered society."[114] It expressed that its intention was to have a good general education "within a system where specialism is necessary."

The Harvard report also noted how introductory classes had become increasingly narrow because they were being taught by professors who had received highly specialized education in graduate schools. The report's recommendations included the proposal to require all students to take the same first-year humanities and social science courses and to choose from one of two first-year natural science courses. Students also had to take an additional three upper-level general education courses, which were to be selected from an approved list.[115] The Redbook's proposal was approved by the Harvard faculty in October 1945, but the recommendations were "never actually adopted" at Harvard. Bell explains that the proposed program went under so many revisions that it was unrecognizable by the time it was rolled out in 1949.[116]

Although Harvard's attempt to reform general education fizzled, the Redbook was read widely and, according to Rudolph, was "a landmark document" that provided "a new impetus to general education."[117] Bisesi stated that the Redbook "crystallized the thoughts of many concerned academicians" about the problems introduced by specialized education.[118] Chase, however, contended that the Redbook wasn't as influential as many believe, and argued that the wave of postwar general education reforms should primarily be attributed to the new sense of cultural unity and a revolt against overspecialization.

By 1950, Chase reported, more than half of the colleges in the country adopted general education programs that shared many characteristics. They emphasized structure, limited electives, and cut back on the number of available course options;[119] team-taught, interdisciplinary studies were added. History and literature

courses stressed Western heritage and values.[120] "All placed great importance on the acquisition of basic skills in language, science, and mathematics, on encouraging ethical behavior, and on creating a sense of shared intellectual and social experience for both faculty and students," Chase wrote.

Stanford University, for example, started its General Studies program in 1956.[121] The university required all students to take three English composition and literature courses. It also mandated that all students take three courses on the history of Western civilization (Stanford uses the quarter system, so that amounted to a year-long sequence).[122] Although a large portion of the curriculum was organized into less-structured distribution requirements, students took at least six courses that immersed them in the same literary and historical tradition.

Harvey Mudd College, Chase reported, "required all students to take core courses in classical civilization, chemistry, mathematics, physics, and English." Whittier College's lower division "consisted entirely of specially designed interdisciplinary core courses…" He added that "very similar programs" were created at other institutions including Brandeis, New York University, Washington and Lee, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Notre Dame.[123] During this time, some institutions added new courses to their existing general education programs that emphasized cultural knowledge and citizenship.[124]

Data from a 1993 report by the National Association of Scholars (NAS) further suggested the growth of more-structured general education programs. In the report, NAS reviewed the top 50 *U.S. News & World Report* schools from the year 1989 and analyzed how general education programs have changed over the following time periods: 1914, 1939, 1964, and 1993. NAS specifically looked at the growth of the team-taught interdisciplinary general education courses that Chase mentioned. According to the report, the percentage of institutions with integrated general education requirements increased from 12 percent in 1939 to 26 percent in 1964. These courses were designed to "provide students with an overview of the development of Western Civilization and/or an opportunity to grapple with political and social issues of central importance to its modern predicament."[125]

The NAS report also documents an uptick in the percentage of institutions with a specific history requirement. According to the data, the percentage of the institutions with a designated history requirement grew from 12 percent in 1939 to 38 percent in 1964. The natural sciences also saw a notable increase; 72 percent of institutions had a natural science requirement in 1939, which increased to 90 percent in 1964. There was, however, a negligible drop in the percentage of institutions with an English composition or other writing requirement, decreasing from 96 percent in 1939 to 92 percent in 1964. There was no growth in specific math, literature, and philosophy requirements during this period.

Even so, taken as a whole, NAS's 1993 report seems to corroborate Chase's depiction of an era of broad agreement on the goals of higher education as a force for unifying society and creating a common base of knowledge.

The Triumph of Content Neutrality—and Worse—in General Education Programs

General education's flourishing was not to last, however. Programs that were once rigorous and fairly prescribed were significantly weakened during the time of the cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. UNC-Chapel Hill's curricular history is an insightful case study of general education's decline.

In the 1963 - 1964 academic year, every UNC-Chapel Hill freshman and sophomore, with some exceptions, had to take the following courses:[126]

- English 1 (composition and rhetoric), 2 (composition and rhetoric), and 21 (literature course with substantial readings in Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton.)[127]
- Modern Civilization 1, 2
- One other social science

- Foreign language 3,4, 21 (1, 2, 3, 4)
- Three natural sciences (or two with sophomore mathematics)
- Two courses in freshman mathematics (or Greek, Latin, logic, or one in mathematics and one in logic)
- Six additional courses (freely chosen electives for the Bachelor of Arts program)
- Physical education

By the 1977–1978 academic year, the robust literature course, English 21, was eliminated from the curriculum.[128] While Greek, Latin, or logic were permitted replacements for mathematics courses in 1963, mere foreign language" courses were permitted as math replacements in 1977. The prescribed course sequence on "Modern Civilization" was struck from the curriculum. Notably, the three natural science courses required in 1963 were reduced to two courses by 1977. Overall, the number of distribution requirements increased, as well as the number of electives.

- English 1 (composition and rhetoric), 2 (composition and rhetoric)
- Foreign language *or* mathematical science (two to four courses)
- Eight divisional electives in the following categories:
  - Social sciences (three courses in at least two departments from an approved list)
  - Humanities and fine arts (three courses in at least two departments from an approved list)
- Natural sciences (two courses, one with a lab)
- College electives (six to eight courses)
- Physical education (two semesters)

By the 1985-86 and 1986-87 academic years, the general education curriculum became predominantly distribution-based.[129] Few courses were explicitly required, with most subject requirements consisting of lists of optional courses from which students could choose. The list for the literature requirement, for example, included over 40 options.

- English 1 (composition and rhetoric), 2 (composition and rhetoric)
- Foreign language (students had to pass level three of a foreign language and had to pass either a fourth level foreign language course or a second mathematical sciences course.)
- Mathematical science (one or two courses, dependent on the level of a foreign language course taken)
- One literature course (from an approved list)
- One fine arts course (from an approved list)
- Two natural sciences (one with a lab)
- One philosophical perspective course (from an approved list)
- Two social science courses (from different departments)
- One course on Western history before 1700, an additional course either on Western history or a non-Western or comparative course (from approved lists)

- Physical education (pass a swimming test and two physical education activities, did not count toward the 120 credits needed for graduation)
- Additional courses in the junior and senior years had to be taken in all of the following categories: literature/fine arts, social sciences, Western/non-Western, natural sciences or mathematical sciences, and philosophical perspective.

In the 1997–1998 academic year, the most notable change from 1985 was the addition of a "cultural diversity" course.[130]

- English 11 (composition and rhetoric) and 12 (composition and rhetoric)
- Foreign language (students had to pass level three or level four, dependent on language choice and placement)
- Mathematics 10 (algebra) and one additional class (students could place above math 10)
- One literature course (from an approved list)
- One fine arts course (from an approved list)
- Two natural sciences (one with a lab)
- One philosophical perspective course (from an approved list)
- Two social science courses (from different departments)
- One course on Western history before 1700, an additional course either on Western history or a non-Western or comparative course (from approved lists)
- One cultural diversity course (from an approved list)
- Physical education (pass a swimming test and two physical education activities, did not count toward the 120 credits needed for graduation)
- Additional courses in the junior and senior years had to be taken in four of the following subjects: literature/fine arts, social sciences, Western/non-Western, natural sciences or mathematical sciences, and philosophical perspective.

The quick devolution of the general education program at UNC-Chapel Hill, one of the foremost public universities in the country, is one example of academia's retreat from organized and shared knowledge.

Additional findings from NAS's report also suggest a widespread decline in the quality of general education programs from the 1960s to the 1990s. According to its findings, the period between 1964 and 1993 witnessed the most drastic reduction in subject-specific requirements. Below are the percentage changes by subject area for this period:[131]

- History: 38 percent of the institutions had specific history requirements in 1964, which dropped to 12 percent in 1993.
- Literature: 38 percent of institutions had specific literature requirements in 1964, dropping to 14 percent in 1993.
- Philosophy: 18 percent of institutions had specific philosophy requirements in 1964, which dropped to 10 percent in 1993.
- Natural Science: 90 percent of institutions had specific natural science requirements in 1964, dropping to 34 percent in 1993.

- Mathematics: 36 percent of institutions required a course in mathematics in 1964, which dropped to 12 percent in 1993. (The report notes that 32 percent of the institutions in 1993 did have "quasi-mathematical" requirements taught outside the math department, but only 12 percent required a traditional mathematics course.)

NAS expressed considerable surprise about the science and mathematics findings: "[W]e might well anticipate that as the century progressed, and as the impact of scientific knowledge became ever more apparent, the commitment to providing a substantial education in the natural sciences and mathematics would have steadily deepened. What we find, in fact, is the opposite."[132]

The explanation behind general education's demise is three-fold. First, the rapid expansion of higher education driven by the 1944 GI Bill and subsequent Baby Boom led to a commensurate increase in the number of faculty, which in turn encouraged ever-narrowing specialization. To compete for faculty, institutions agreed to let them teach to their narrow interests. Some of these courses had little interest for the great majority of students as pure electives. However, enrollment in these courses could be increased by allowing students to take them—no matter how esoteric or frivolous—to satisfy general education requirements, and university administrations were willing to accommodate them by loosening requirements. As a result, the raw number of course offerings in general education programs grew significantly.

A 1968 Stanford faculty committee report acknowledged the tension between the goals of general education and professors' academic preferences. In the report, the committee stated that the ideal of general education as a shared intellectual experience rooted in Western culture is "dead or dying" due to the rise of faculty specialization.[133] The average faculty member "prefers to teach and learn what *he* wants to teach and learn, not what is prescribed by a committee," the report explained.[134] It is important to note that part of faculty members' discipline-specific focus stems from pressure to produce original research and academic publications. "Publish or perish" is a common phrase in academia, which was also used during the time of this report.[135]

But in the end, the committee proposed to make it even easier for professors to teach to their preferences. It argued that the old program "should be substantially modified" in order to align the curriculum as much as possible with the "objective" of curricular planning: "to the extent possible, to let the teacher teach what he wants to teach and the student learn what he wants to learn."[136]

The quick devolution of the general education program at UNC-Chapel Hill, one of the foremost public universities in the country, is one example of academia's retreat from organized and shared knowledge.

The curricular quasi-anarchy promoted by Stanford increasingly became the model adopted through higher education. The result has been the general education "smorgasbord" found at most colleges to this day that Allan Bloom decried in his 1987 book *The Closing of the American Mind.* Bloom wrote: "[W]hen a student arrives at the university, he finds a bewildering variety of departments and a bewildering variety of courses. And there is no official guidance, no university-wide agreement, about what he should study."[137] The result is that students sample a random assortment of courses that often do not relate to or address one another. "The net effect of the student's encounter with the college catalogue," Bloom argued, "is bewilderment and very often demoralization. It is just a matter of chance whether he finds one or two professors who can give him an insight into one of the great visions of education that have been the distinguishing part of every civilized nation."[138]

A second factor is the full flowering of the educational formalism of the Progressive Era. A fundamental philosophical shift became apparent in the curriculum. The rationale for teaching history, for example, was no longer to

immerse students in their culture and unite them in a common understanding of the physical and moral universe, but to teach them supposed content-neutral thinking skills directly applicable to the real world. The value of higher education was primarily seen as the means to gain marketable skills for employment.

Increasingly, schools began replacing coursework in specific subjects such as literature and history with coursework that emphasized pedagogy and methodology. As Alston Chase noted, "The shift in emphasis from history to how a historian thinks can be made instantly within any course."[139] He continued, "Thus, rather than presenting material to students chronologically, as originally intended, many courses became organized analytically. Rather than history, they taught methods of analysis."

The fruits of this philosophical shift are evident in countless general education programs. A general education requirement at Stanford University, for example, is vaguely titled "Ways of Thinking/Ways of Doing" (simply referred to as "Ways").[140] Some of the subcategories under "Ways" include "Aesthetic and Interpretive Inquiry" and "Social Inquiry."[141] Stanford students are told that "Ways" will allow them to "develop a set of intellectual tools for your toolbox."[142] One general education requirement at California State University, San Bernardino is simply titled "Critical Thinking."[143] Rollins College's "Mathematical Thinking competency" may be fulfilled by taking a course "from a variety of departments."[144] Knowledge of calculus or statistics isn't emphasized, but a vague ability to think mathematically.

The curricular quasi-anarchy promoted by Stanford increasingly became the model adopted through higher education.

The content-neutral approach is also politically safe. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the political and intellectual movement dubbed the "New Left" was forging an intense battle against education based on Western civilization. The New Left claimed the West was an ideological construct that had to be exposed for its racism and sexism. Harvard historian James Hankins notes that the politicizing effects of this movement started to notably impact universities in the 1980s.[145] What is often referred to as the "canon wars" swept across college campuses.[146] Many wanted to dismantle Western-focused education, others defended it. Patrick Deneen, a Notre Dame political science professor, observes that a content-neutral or skills-focused approach to the curriculum allowed a lot of campuses to call a truce on disagreements over content:

> Debates about substance were put to rest as agreement was reached on the contentless goal of critical thinking, which allowed academics to lay down their arms and embrace the common project of cultivating a thinking style. Indeed, it has reached a pass in which the only idea impervious to critical thinking is the shared goal of critical thinking: No one quite knows what it is, but we can all agree that we want our students to be able to do it. Push-pins is equal to Homer, and Homer equal to push-pins, since both can be claimed to foster critical thinking.[147]

Content Returns—but as Indoctrination

Content-neutrality is suboptimal. But the cultural turmoil that began in the 1960s had far more dire implications for general education. During a time of conflict, student protests, and widespread rejection of traditional cultural mores, colleges were pressured to align their curricula with the hyper-egalitarian and anti-Western ethos that animated student bodies. The prevailing worldview of the more militant students rejected the very notion of essential knowledge. Some general education programs were completely removed or significantly altered. Bloom, who decried the relativism that came to dominate college campuses, was dismayed when Cornell University, his employer, dismantled its old general education program in the

1960s. Bloom disapproved of the decision because, although he judged the unrevised curriculum imperfect, it was "a threadbare reminiscence of the unity of knowledge and provided an obstinate little hint that there are some things one must know about if one is to be educated."[148]

Bloom blamed relativism for the rejection of traditional content. However, while that may have been the case when he wrote his book in the late 1980s, the main problem, especially now, is more pernicious. The notion of teaching what E.D. Hirsch terms "traditional literate culture" is not rejected on relativistic grounds that views all knowledge as equal. Instead, the primary problem is the insertion of a supposedly unquestionable moral vision that is often explicitly prescribed in the curriculum and informs the very structure of general education programs. It is the new moral vision that interprets every branch of knowledge in terms of gender ideology, systemic racism and oppression, and diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Yet, this worldview with its strong authoritarian tendencies shares one characteristic with the content-neutral approach: it does not demand a highly structured curriculum. Its proponents are often satisfied as long as students—through one course of study or another—imbibe and regurgitate the approved moral precepts and assumptions surrounding social relations, politics, science, economics, and history. Consequently, catchwords laden with politicized meanings such as "diversity," "equity," "gender," and "inclusion" not only appear in countless introductory course titles and descriptions, they describe stand-alone general education requirements. UCLA's College of Letters and Science, for example, has a "Diversity" requirement.[149] Before it updated its curriculum in 2022, Emory University had a "Race and Ethnicity" requirement.[150] UNC-Chapel Hill's new general education program includes a "Power, Difference, and Inequality" requirement.[151] North Carolina State University has a "U.S. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion" requirement.[152] The list goes on.

The content-neutral approach is also politically safe.

As a result of these influences, general education's current trajectory is not promising. Faculty control over the curriculum continues to tighten, and they are resisting attempts to make general education more coherent and meaningful. Colleges also face a "demographic cliff," in which college attendance is expected to drop precipitously. The resultant competition for a shrinking pool of students may cause schools to further loosen general education standards to appease the desire of those students to exercise choice and avoid restrictive constraints.

The country is closely approaching a time, if it's not already there, in which general education programs won't really exist. They may remain so in name, but the reality will be a haphazard accumulation of facts, attitudes, and skills, that may and (very often) may not be useful. Either way, higher education is risking producing students who are, in Steinbeck's words, "atom-sized in their souls," missing "the whole world over [their] fence."

PART IV: ALTERNATIVE VISIONS

General education programs are now ubiquitous in higher education. Many institutions acknowledge the importance of teaching students to be well-rounded thinkers prepared to engage with problems in the real world. The overwhelming majority of schools employ some variation of the "distribution requirements" philosophy in their general education programs to effect this goal.

But other visions of general education that manifest in strikingly distinct curricula exist. In some cases, the general education program at one college may be unrecognizable from one at another college. Students and parents should closely examine the content and organization of general education programs when discerning which school to attend.

GENERAL EDUCATION LANDSCAPE: THREE CASE STUDIES

The following three general education programs—two actual and one proposed—offer a range of representative thinking about general education. The first is the program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which is based on skill-building through distribution requirements. Next is the much-heralded "core" at Columbia College (the arts and sciences division of Columbia University). While it began with a general philosophy of promoting a common Western culture, Columbia's core has developed incrementally for nearly a century and reflects some of the transitions in thought during that time. The third is a program that was proposed by Robert Hutchins, the former president of the University of Chicago, who envisioned a general education program aligned with the "Great Books" movement that emerged early in the 20th century.

UNC-Chapel Hill

UNC-Chapel Hill's general education program, IDEAS in Action, is very much a skills-centered, content-neutral, distribution requirements system. But it also represents the most recent turn in general education theories, away from content-neutrality toward explicit leftist indoctrination.

UNC boasts that no two students will follow the same path through the program and that they aren't given a list of prescribed courses.[153] The program provides a "roadmap," but each student designs his or her own path. On the surface, the university appears to embrace a skills-focused, primarily content-neutral educational philosophy. This philosophy is prominently declared on the program's website: "*Regardless of what you choose to study* [emphasis added], IDEAS in Action will strengthen your ability to think critically, work collaboratively and communicate persuasively."

But while the program is largely content-neutral in that it rarely requires students to take any courses in particular, it does stress an ideologically slanted point of view in many of its course offerings. Indeed, a significant number of the courses from which students can choose appear to be intended to turn students into political activists. Furthermore, as will be discussed below, the university explicitly requires students to learn about issues of "power" and "inequality." Some possible courses that satisfy this requirement include "Queering China," "Queer LatinX Environmentalisms," and "Introduction to Transgender Studies."[154]

The program is broken up into three broad sections:

- First Year Foundations
- Focus Capacities
- Reflection & Integration

In the first year, students fulfill the following requirements:

- College Thriving (1 unit): Students learn strategies for "effective learning," as well as topics that touch on "well-being."
- First-Year Seminar (3 units): Students have numerous seminars they may choose from. Examples include "The Obama Presidency," "Monster, Murders, and Mayhem in Microhistorical Analysis: French Case Studies," and "Tree, Timer, and Totem."[155] (A first-year "launch," a small class led by a professor about a specific major, can be taken instead of the seminar.)
- Triple-I: Ideas, Information, & Inquiry (3 units). While the category has some valuable courses, such as "Ethics, Economics, and Public Policy" or "Humans and the Cosmos," many of the courses seem ideologically slanted or superficial: "The Future of Food," "Countering Hate," and "The Idea of Race" are some examples.[156] Students must also take a data literacy course (1 unit).
- Writing at the Research University
- Global Language

The largest component of the curriculum falls under the "Focus Capacities" category. This is where the university's content-neutral philosophy becomes especially apparent. Students are explicitly encouraged to "Design your course of study!" and are informed that they can "choose from hundreds of courses to fulfill" the nine generic "capacities" they are supposed to master.[157]

UNC boasts that no two students will follow the same path through the program and that they aren't given a list of prescribed courses.

The nine "focus capacities" are:

- Aesthetic & Interpretive Analysis
- Creative Expression, Practice, & Production
- Engagement with the Human Past
- Ethical & Civic Values
- Global Understanding & Engagement
- Natural Scientific Investigation
- Power, Difference, & Inequality
- Quantitative Reasoning
- Ways of Knowing

Students must take one course for each capacity requirement and must complete one empirical investigation lab. Students cannot "double up" their focus capacity requirements. The university states, "a single course may be used to fulfill only one Focus Capacity requirement (not including lab)."[158]

There are some striking flaws in this general education framework. For one, several of the categories are patently liable to politicization and geared toward influencing students to adopt a particular ideological standpoint on moral, social, and political issues. This is most apparent in the "focus capacity" requirement entitled "Power, Difference, & Inequality." Furthermore, the number of courses students may choose from in each category is so numerous that it is extremely unlikely any two students would have the same general education. By catering to each student's preferences, the university fails to provide students with the connected and shared knowledge that supports their participation in an academic community and in civic life.

The final component of the program, "Reflection & Integration," is where students are supposed to experience hands-on application of their newly gained skills. Students must fulfill the following requirements in this section:

- Research & Discovery (a research project)
- High-Impact Experience (study abroad, internship, service learning, etc.)
- Lifetime Fitness
- Communication Beyond Carolina
- Campus Life experience (attend an on-campus event)

Diving deep into a research project can be academically fruitful, but, once more, the topics that students are permitted to "research" seem to make this requirement another excuse to insert highly ideological material into the curriculum. "Global Cities: Space, Power, and Identity in the Built Environment" and "Gender and Sexuality in Middle Eastern Literature" are some of the courses that fulfill this requirement.[159] While an internship can be a valuable opportunity for students to apply their learning to the work environment, study abroad programs are a mixed bag. They are often glorified sightseeing adventures in which students spend more time checking tourist destinations off their list and late-night partying than meaningfully interacting with a foreign culture.[160]

The "Communication Beyond Carolina" requirement allows students to take courses that are niche, superficial, or ideological. "Iranian Prison Literature," "Podcasting," and "Theatre of the Word" are available options for this requirement.[161] Although "Public Speaking" is a worthwhile course, it can be easily passed over for other courses such as "The Invention of the Modern Artist."

Overall, the program doesn't require students to "check off a list of prescribed courses" and doesn't even mandate that students must complete most requirements within a specific time frame. Other than the broadly defined requirements, students' personal preferences are the program's organizing principle. Nowhere does the university articulate which body of knowledge is essential for college study. Instead, it describes its general education program as an "experience" that is "personalized to [students'] interests, strengths and potential."[162]

Columbia College

Since its inception in 1919 with the development of its "Contemporary Civilization" course, the design and character of Columbia College's general education program has changed, but the curriculum retains a great deal of its focus on great works of the Western tradition. The general education or "core" program is designed to give students a common intellectual experience. The spirit of shared inquiry is fostered by small discussion-based classes taught by core instructors from all academic disciplines. The curriculum itself comprises "core texts" or "works of major cultural significance," presented in chronological order, with a Western focus.[163]

Columbia's general education is composed of the following course requirements (credits may be estimated):

- Art Humanities: Masterpieces of Western Art (3 credits)

- Contemporary Civilization (8 credits)
- Frontiers of Science: (10 credits, three courses)
- Literature Humanities (8 credits)
- Music Humanities (3 credits)
- University Writing (3 credits)
- Core Electives:
    - Global Core (6 credits, 2 courses, explores mostly non-Western cultures in a historical context)
    - Foreign Language (7 or 8 credits, or take a placement test)
    - Physical Education (2 credits)

A former director of the core curriculum, Roosevelt Montás, insists that a good general education doesn't have to be centered on the Western tradition, let alone be exclusively Western. Montás—an English and American Studies lecturer—even laments Columbia's lack of non-Western works as a "deficiency." At the same time, however, he argues that "there is a compelling case for keeping the Western tradition at the center of general education, at least in the West," noting that "[k]ey aspects of the modern world emerge from this tradition of contest and debate, loose and fractured as it is."[164] He adds that "the case for its importance in understanding our emerging global culture is overwhelming. The tradition matters not because it is Western, but because of its contribution to human questions of the highest order," argues Montás.

Although there are no explicit "history," "philosophy," or "economics" courses listed in the curriculum, the "Contemporary Civilization" course includes required readings in all of those subjects. Students, for example, are required to read philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, René Descartes, John Locke, Immanuel Kant, and Friedrich Nietzsche. For history, they have to read the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and eight Federalist Papers.[165] Economics readings are limited to Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*.

The core electives seem to be the weakest part of the curriculum. The two "Global core" courses students must take can be selected from a long list of options, ranging from "Muslim Societies" to "Contemporary Central Asia" to "Indian and Nigerian Film Cultures."[166] That such narrow and varied taste-testing of other cultural traditions will contribute to the goal of making students better thinkers and citizens is a dubious proposition. While learning a foreign language is a useful skill, an introductory course in economics is arguably more essential, as it is more critical for citizens to understand basic economics than to master elementary phrases in another language. It also seems unnecessary to have physical education in a general education program. It should suffice for a college to have a gym and sports activities available on campus. Removing these nonessential core electives would allow room in the curriculum for individual history, philosophy, and economics courses.

Robert Maynard Hutchins

In 1936, former University of Chicago president Robert Maynard Hutchins envisioned a general education program that emphasized reading the Great Books of the Western Canon. These texts, he argued, "cover every department of knowledge" and are fundamental to an understanding of the natural sciences, mathematics, economics, and politics.[167] He furthermore believed engagement with these texts would strengthen students' minds to discern truth from error and would allow the university to fulfill one of its core purposes: "to draw out the elements of our common human nature."[168]

Hutchins granted that the general education curriculum he proposed may or may not be immediately useful in helping graduates adjust to the real world or to get good jobs. However, he suggested that the curriculum fulfills a deeper and more important function: the cultivation of the intellectual virtues. "By the intellectual virtues I mean good intellectual habits," he explained.[169]

Hutchins expressed concern for intellectual unity within the university itself, arguing that professors and departments need common intellectual training that enables them to understand each other's specialized fields at a basic level. Without general education, academics would be siloed in their own disciplines, unable to convey any baseline understanding of the world. "This means more than having the same language and the same general interest in advancing knowledge," Hutchins explained. "It means having a common stock of fundamental ideas."[170]

The length and timing of Hutchins's program was unconventional. He envisioned it as a terminal four-year program that starts at the beginning of students' junior year in high school and concludes at the end of their sophomore year in college.[171] He assumed most students who go through the program would not continue on to specialized university training, yet such an education would nevertheless prepare students for specialized study.

Hutchins believed engagement with these texts would strengthen students' minds to discern truth from error and would allow the university to fulfill one of its core purposes.

Hutchins proposed the following general education program:

- The Classics: Great Books
- Grammar
- Rhetoric
- Logic
- Mathematics, with a special emphasis on Euclidean mathematics

Summarizing his ideal curriculum, Hutchins wrote:

> We have then for general education a course of study consisting of the greatest books of the western world and the arts of reading, writing, thinking, and speaking, together with mathematics, the best exemplar of the processes of human reason. If our hope has been to frame a curriculum which educes the elements of our common human nature, this program should realize our hope. If we wish to prepare the young for intelligent action, this course of study should assist us; for they will have learned what has been done in the past, and what the greatest men have thought. They will have learned how to think themselves. If we wish to lay a basis for advanced study, that basis is provided. If we wish to secure true universities, we may look forward to them, because students and professors may acquire through this course of study a common stock of ideas and common methods of dealing with them. All the needs of a general education in America seem to be satisfied by this curriculum.[172]

Hutchins's rigorous ideas-based curriculum contained many desirable elements. Such a course of study directly teaches students logical thinking and introduces them to masterpieces of literary, philosophical, and historical thought. One need that Hutchins's curriculum apparently fails to provide, however, is scientific investigation. Scientific works were no doubt included in his conception of the "classics," but as valuable as reading Isaac Newton's *Principia* may be, it isn't a replacement for the hands-on application of the scientific method that a natural science lab course offers.

RECOMMENDED GENERAL EDUCATION CURRICULUM

The Martin Center recommends a general education curriculum that is based on the goals and ideas discussed in the vision section earlier in this report. It is intended to produce better citizens, better minds, and better humans; we believe it to be a dramatic improvement over most existing general education programs.

The proposed curriculum covers specific content that will help students understand the development of crucial discoveries in major fields like history, philosophy, science, and mathematics within the historical context of Western civilization. It excludes courses offering easy A's and superficial or politicized content surrounding the latest intellectual fads. Instead, this ideal curriculum is crafted to inculcate rigorous thinking by presenting students with challenging texts and ideas that have stood the test of time and have been shown to be capable of humanizing the soul and inculcating intellectual virtue. Furthermore, by presenting the Western intellectual tradition through the development of its ideas, this curriculum will help students appreciate the values and rationales underlying this country's political, social, and cultural institutions.

An example curriculum might take the following form, under two broad categories:

1. Reasoning and Writing (19 Credit Hours)

- Formal Logic (3 units) or calculus for science majors
- Statistics (3 units)
- Composition (3 units)
- Rhetoric (3 units)
- Ideas of Science (3 units)
- Physical and Natural Sciences (4 units, 1 course, 1 lab)

2. Foundational Ideas in Western Civilization (21 Credit Hours)

- History of Western Civilization I and II (6 units)
- American History or Government (3 units)
- Great Books in the American and English Traditions (3 units)
- Great Books in the Western Tradition (3 units)
- The Western Philosophical Tradition (3 units)
- Political and Economic Systems (3 units)

Total: 40 Credit Hours

Courses in the "Reasoning and Writing" category will help students become concise, systematic thinkers, and persuasive writers and speakers. Courses in formal logic and statistics will equip students to identify patterns of good and bad reasoning—skills that are crucial for future citizens who will be wading through the swamp of politicization, propaganda, and fallacies found in the contemporary media. And statistics are not only important in the sciences but are the basic building blocks of the data analysis that is crucial for many professions.

While students should take at least one lab-based course in order to apply the scientific method hands-on, an "Ideas of Biology" course, for example, will tell the story of biology from Aristotle's first empirical investigations and theories of biology, through Linnaeus' systems of classification, to Lamarck's early

attempts to formulate biological laws, culminating in Darwin's development of the theory of evolution. The goal of this course would be to leave students with an appreciation for science as a branch of rational inquiry that has developed over time.

The "Foundational Ideas in Western Civilization" category will provide students with a workable timeline of history by teaching the grand chronological sweep of history and ideas from Ancient Greece and Rome to the Middle Ages and Renaissance and through the Enlightenment and 19th-century up to today. Students should also dedicate time to the history of this country to appreciate where the institutions they often take for granted come from, how they changed, and to consider where things might have changed for the worse or for the better. These history courses will allow for evaluation and consideration of big ideas, but they should also involve straightforward memorization of crucial facts.

The curriculum isn't just about grinding information into students' heads, however. Culturally competent and humanistically formed students are more likely to appreciate literature, art, beauty, and the complexities of arguments about justice, freedom, happiness, and the nature of the good. Courses on "Great Books" discuss these topics in great depth. By doing so, they can provide an antidote to the flimsy relativism that views these topics as just "matters of opinion."

Increasing understanding of fundamental ideas is not just an intellectual exercise but has real world implications. While many college students may be relativists when it comes to matters of literary, aesthetic, moral, and religious judgment, they are not when it comes to politics and economics. Unfortunately, certainty does not equal understanding. Many students enter college fully convinced that "greedy capitalists" are to blame for high prices, that markets are unnecessary and cruel, and that seizing the assets of the rich is a viable solution to society's problems. At the same time, such students rarely consider the fragility of republican freedom or the problems with utopian alternatives.

A good general education program should address the confusion and lack of intellectual depth of these students. A course on "Politics and Economics" would introduce students to the most important ideas of economics that are accepted by the vast majority of mainstream economists, such as the mechanisms of the price system, the causes of inflation, and the effects of various government interventions in the market, as well as the costs and benefits of alternative political systems. Similarly, the rich tradition of political philosophy found in the "Western Philosophical Tradition" course will help students see why freedom is valuable, the relationship between politics and various visions of the good life, and the influences and ideas behind the American Founding.

Undergraduates who have grappled with these ideas are more likely to grow into citizens capable of political, economic, and ethical judgments that are simultaneously humbler and better informed.

Courses in the "Reasoning and Writing" category will help students become concise, systematic thinkers, and persuasive writers and speakers.

CONCLUSION

What can be done given general education's state of disrepair across the country? There are both short-term and long-term ways forward. Solutions in the short term largely lie in the hands of students and their parents. They should be acutely discerning about which institutions to attend and highly strategic in selecting the courses they take once there.

The simplest way to ensure that students receive a serious general education is to pick an institution offering a structured program that emphasizes the West's intellectual heritage. It is possible, however, to receive a good general education at mainstream colleges. But parents and students must closely examine each prospective institution's program, paying careful attention to its content and structure. With enough finesse and forethought, families can shrewdly navigate the smorgasbord of class offerings found at many institutions. It is possible to construct a robust general education for oneself, even at an institution like UNC-Chapel Hill where there are broadly defined distribution requirements and a seemingly endless list of courses to satisfy them. Amidst the proliferation of superficial and politicized course options, good courses are still offered.

The difficulty for many students, however, will be in knowing what to study in the first place to maximize the personal growth that a good general education program should provide. Such growth rarely happens by chance; rather, it results from a well-conceived program that intentionally stimulates a student's higher thought processes. It is the inexcusable failure of universities that put the responsibility for making decisions about general education on students, many of whom do not have parents or advisors capable of guiding them knowledgeably.

It is for this reason that the long-term solution of widespread curricular reform must be pursued. General education is too important to leave to the whims of directionless undergraduates. The country's health and longevity are intertwined with the quality of the college graduates it produces. And much of that quality depends on general education. For higher education remains the path chosen by a substantial number of young people, many of whom will populate the most influential sectors of society in government, business, journalism, and academia. The time they spend in college will not only mold their competence to perform difficult professional tasks but will inform how they approach complex moral and political issues.

General education is an opportune way to instill in students a sense of civic duty, an appreciation for American values, and to help them realize that they have a part in safeguarding the country's ideals and institutions. It is, in these ways and others, very much a public good. (It is also a private good largely because of the higher income resulting from additional education.) Higher education is funded in part because it is at least implicitly understood that the preservation of the country's principles, attitudes, and practices depends on what its citizens and leaders know.

University boards, alumni, and legislators have a responsibility to ensure that the general education curricula of their institutions offer a "unified general education" that transmits students' "common cultural heritage," as stated by President Truman's higher education commission nearly 80 years ago. In a time of fragmented knowledge, political polarization, and cultural decay, the commission's call for a "core of unity" in general education resonates more clearly and loudly today than ever before.

Notes

1. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987). p. 340.
2. NC State University, GEP Humanities. http://catalog.ncsu.edu/undergraduate/gep-category-requirements/gep-humanities/.
3. UNC-Chapel Hill, IDEAs in Action, Preparing Graduates to Become Lifelong Learners. https://ideasinaction.unc.edu/.
4. Paul L. Gaston, General Education Transformed: How We Can, Why We Must, (Washington, D.C.: The American Association of Colleges and Universities, 2015). p. vi
5. Harvard University, Harvard College, Program in General Education, Histories, Societies, Individuals. https://gened.fas.harvard.edu/histories-societies-individuals-courses.
6. University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Degree and General Education Requirements. http://catalog.illinois.edu/general-information/degree-general-education-requirements/.
7. University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Course Explorer, Humanities & the Arts. https://courses.illinois.edu/gened/2023/fall/HUM.
8. The American Council of Trustees and Alumni, *What Will They Learn? A Survey of Core Requirements at Our Nation's Colleges and Universities,* 2022-2023.
9. University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Course Explorer, Natural Sciences & Technology. https://courses.illinois.edu/gened/2023/fall/NAT.
10. Daniel T. Willingham, *Why Don't Students Like School?: A Cognitive Scientist Answers Questions About How the Mind Works and What It Means for the Classroom, 2nd edition* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2021). p. 112.
11. Willingham, 2nd edition, p. 112.
12. Willingham, 2nd edition, p. 113.
13. E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *How to Educate a Citizen: The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2020). p. 120.
14. Hirsch, *Shared Knowledge*, p. 121.
15. Hirsch, *Shared Knowledge*, pp. 121, 122.
16. Hirsch, *Shared Knowledge*, p. 122.
17. Paul A. Kirschner, John Sweller, Richard E. Clark. (2006). *Why Minimal Guidance During Instruction Does Not Work: An Analysis of the Failure of Constructivist, Discovery, Problem-Based, Experiential, and inquiry-Based Teaching*, Educational Psychologist, 41 (2) 76.
18. Kirschner, Sweller, Clark. pp. 76-77.
19. Anders Ericsson, Robert Pool, *Peak: Secrets from the New Science of Expertise* (New York: First Mariner Books, 2017). p. 60.
20. Daniel T. Willingham, *Why Don't Students Like School?: A Cognitive Scientist Answers Questions About How the Mind Works and What It Means for the Classroom, 1st edition* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009). p. 14.
21. Willingham, 1st edition, p. 14.
22. Willingham, 1st edition, p. 14.
23. Willingham, 1st edition, p. 33.
24. Willingham, 1st edition, p. 34.
25. Willingham, 1st edition, p. 35.
26. Willingham, 1st edition, p. 34.
27. Hirsch, *Shared Knowledge, p*. 122.
28. William G. Chase, Herbert A. Simon, "Perception in Chess." *Cognitive Psychology* 4, no. 1 (January 1, 1973): 55–81. p. 56.
29. James P. Van Overschelde, Alice F. Healy. "Learning of Nondomain Facts in High- and Low-Knowledge Domains." Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory and Cognition 27, no. 5 (January 1, 2001): 1160–71.
30. Willingham, 1st edition, p. 42.
31. E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987). p. 2.
32. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy,* p. 12.
33. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy,* p.13.
34. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy*, p. 18.
35. "A Noted Man Gone" The Boston Globe, Boston, Massachusetts, December 30, 1878 Page 1.

36. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy*, p. 29.

37. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy*, p. 29.

38. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy*, p. 26.

39. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy*, p. 107.

40. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy*, p. 91.

41. Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992). p. 186.

42. Neil Postman, *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996). p. 18.

43. Jay Schalin, "UNC System Adopting Political Litmus Tests for Employment and Attendance," The James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal, March 29, 2021.

44. Jonathan Rauch, *Kindly Inquisitors: The New Attacks on Free Thought, Expanded Edition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013). p. 6.

45. Shannon Watkins, "Study Only What You Want? Not If You Want to Be Successful," The James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal, July 2017.

46. Roosevelt Montás, *Rescuing Socrates: How the Great Books Changed My Life and Why They Matter for a New Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021). p. 211.

47. Montás, p. 212.

48. National Archives and Records Administration, Founders Online, "The Report of a Constitution or Form of Government for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts 28 – 31 October 1779." https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-08-02-0161-0002.

49. David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Touchstone, 2001). pp. 19, 604.

50. Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism* (London: Smith, Elder and Co, 1869). p. viii.

51. Anthony Kronman, *The Assault on American Excellence*, (New York: Free Press, 2019). p. 28.

52. Kronman, p. 30.

53. Kronman, p. 30.

54. James Hankins, "Liberal Learning beyond Liberalism: The Humanities as Soulcraft in the Renaissance and Today," Public Discourse, June 13, 2020.

55. John Adams, "From John Adams to John Taylor, 5, March 1815," National Archives and Records Administration, Founders Online. https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-6425.

56. "From John Adams to John Taylor."

57. Robert George, "Academic Freedom and the Liberal Arts," *The American Spectator,* September 2, 2008.

58. Hirsch, *Shared Knowledge*, p. 6.

59. Lorraine Smith Pangle and Thomas L. Pangle, *The Learning of Liberty: The Educational Ideas of the American Founders* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993). p. 150.

60. George Washington, "George Washington's Last Will and Testament 9, July 1799," National Archives and Records Administration, Founders Online. https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/06-04-02-0404-0001.

61. James Madison, *The Writings, vol. 8* (1808-1819). New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1908.

62. George Thomas, *The Founders and the Idea of a National University: Constituting the American Mind* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015). p. 5.

63. Noah Webster, "On the Education of Youth in America," The Federalist Papers Project.

64. Megan Brenan, "Extreme Pride in Being American Remains Near Record Low," Gallup, June 29, 2023.

65. Megan Brenan, "Record-Low 38% Extremely Proud to Be American," Gallup, June 29, 2022.

66. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Harvey C. Mansfield, Delba Winthrop, eds., (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000). p. 407.

67. Tocqueville, p. 291.

68. Eric Adler, *The Battle of the Classics: How a Nineteenth-Century Debate Can Save the Humanities Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020). p. 50.

69. Pangle and Pangle, p. 183.

70. Adler, p. 63.

71. Alston Chase, *The Rise and Fall of General Education: 1945–1980*, The National Association of Scholars, 1993. p. 23.
72. Frederick Rudolph, *The American College & University: A History* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1962, 1990). p. 252.
73. Roger L. Geiger, *The History of American Higher Education: Learning and Culture from the Founding to World War II* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015). p. 281.
74. Geiger, p. 281.
75. Rudolph, p. 247.
76. Geiger, p. 285.
77. Geiger, p. 285.
78. Michael Bisesi, *Historical Developments in American Undergraduate Education: General Education and the Core Curriculum,* British Journal of Educational Studies, Vol. 30, No. 2 pp. 199-212, June 1982. p. 200.
79. Adler, p. 81.
80. Adler, p. 74.
81. Bisesi, p. 200.
82. Rudolph, p. 455.
83. John Steinbeck, *East of Eden* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002). p. 537-538.
84. Steinbeck, p. 538.
85. Daniel Bell, *The Reforming of General Education: The Columbia College Experience in its National Setting* (New York and London, Columbia University Press, 1966). p. 18.
86. Chase, p. 24.
87. Robert Maynard Hutchins, *The Higher Learning in America* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1995). p. 71.
88. Geiger, p. 414.
89. Adler, p. 82.
90. Earl James McGrath, *The General Education Movement (An Editorial)*, The Journal of General Education Vol. 1, No. 1, October 1946. p. 6.
91. Adler, p. 83.
92. Rudolph, p. 456.
93. Bell, p. 14.
94. Bisesi, p. 202.
95. Bisesi, p. 202.
96. Columbia College, The Core Curriculum, Chapter 1: "the insistent problems of the present." https://www.college.columbia.edu/core/oasis/history1.php.
97. Bell, p. 21.
98. Bell, pp. 13-14.
99. Columbia College, "250 Years: Columbia College, 1754-2004: An Inner Life of Sufficient Richness - From General Honors to Literature Humanities." https://www.college.columbia.edu/cct_archive/may04/columbia250_2.html.
100. Bell, p. 13.
101. Bell, p. 12.
102. Chase, p. 25.
103. UW Press, "The Experimental College; A classic in the history of American higher education," https://uwpress.wisc.edu/books/2103.htm.
104. Bisesi, p. 203.
105. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy*, p. 119.
106. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy*, 110.
107. Rudolph, p. 455.
108. Chase, p. 26.
109. Earl J. McGrath, *General Education and the Plight of Modern Man*, The Lilly Endowment, Inc, 1976. p. 23.
110. The Department of State of the United States, *Higher Education for Democracy: A Report of The President's Commission on Higher Education,* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1947). p. 47.
111. *Higher Education for Democracy*, p. 48.
112. *Higher Education for Democracy*, pp. 48-49.
113. Bell, p. 46.
114. Bisesi, p. 204.
115. Bell, p. 47.
116. Bell, p. 47.
117. Frederick Rudolph, *Curriculum: A History of the American Undergraduate Course of Study Since 1636* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993). pp. 258, 259.

118. Bisesi, p. 204.
119. Chase, p. 21-22.
120. Chase, p. 21.
121. Stanford Libraries, "Stanford Publications: Courses and degrees. 1957-1958," p. 7.
122. Stanford Publications, p. 8.
123. Chase, p. 28.
124. Chase, p. 29.
125. Stephen H. Balch, Rita Zürcher, *The Dissolution of General Education: 1914-1993,* The National Association of Scholars, November 1996. p. 35.
126. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, "Schedule of Issues of The Record for Year 1963-1964." p, 45.
127. "The Record for Year 1963-1964," p. 165.
128. Record of The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, "The Undergraduate Bulletin: 1977-1978 Issue." pp. 31-34.
129. Record of The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, "The Undergraduate Bulletin: 1985-1987 Issue." pp. 38-48.
130. Record of The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, "The Undergraduate Bulletin: Fall 1997-1998 Record." pp. 26-30.
131. Balch, Zürcher. pp. 27, 29, 30, 36.
132. Balch, Zürcher. p. 36.
133. The Steering Committee, the Study of Education at Stanford: "The Study of Education at Stanford: Report to the University: Undergraduate Education," November 1968. p. 9.
134. The Study of Education at Stanford, p. 10.
135. The Study of Education at Stanford, p. 67.
136. The Study of Education at Stanford, pp. 5, 12.
137. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1987). p. 338.
138. Bloom, p. 339.
139. Chase, 31.
140. Stanford University, "Ways of Thinking / Ways of Doing," https://ways.stanford.edu/.
141. Stanford University, "About Ways," https://ways.stanford.edu/about.
142. Stanford University, "Do you Know the Ways? Quickstart Guide for Students," https://ways.stanford.edu/about/ways-quickstart-guide-students.
143. California State University, San Bernardino, "General Education Program," 2023-24 Catalog, https://catalog.csusb.edu/general-education-program/.
144. Rollins College, "Rollins Foundations in the Liberal Arts, Competencies: Curriculum and Curricular Requirements," https://www.rollins.edu/rollins-foundations-liberal-arts/competencies/index.html.
145. Hankins.
146. Matt Reed, "Remember the Canon Wars?" Inside Higher Ed, April 11, 2013.
147. Patrick J. Deneen, "Against the Great Books: Questioning Our Approach to the Western Canon," First Things, January, 2013.
148. Bloom, p. 320.
149. University of California, Los Angeles, Registrar's Office, "College of Letters and Science Diversity Requirement," https://registrar.ucla.edu/academics/diversity-requirement/college-of-letters-and-science-diversity-requirement.
150. Emory University, College of Arts and Sciences, Catalog, "GOLD GER (FALL 2022 AND EARLIER)," http://catalog.college.emory.edu/academics/ger/gold-2009-ger.html.
151. UNC-Chapel Hill, IDEAs in Action, "Power, Difference, & Inequality," https://ideasinaction.unc.edu/focus-capacities/power-difference-inequality/.
152. North Carolina State University, "Undergraduate Courses, Curricula, and Academic Standards, General Education Program: Fall 2023 and After," https://oucc.dasa.ncsu.edu/courses/general-education-program/.
153. UNC-Chapel Hill, IDEAs in Action, "Preparing Graduates to Become Lifelong Learners." https://ideasinaction.unc.edu/.
154. UNC-Chapel Hill, IDEAs in Action, "Power, Difference, and Inequality." https://catalog.unc.edu/undergraduate/ideas-in-action/power-inequality/.

155. UNC-Chapel Hill, IDEAs in Action, "First-Year Seminars & First-Year Launches." https://ideasinaction.unc.edu/first-year-foundations/first-year-seminars-launches/.

156. UNC-Chapel Hill, IDEAs in Action, "Ideas, Information, and Inquiry (Triple-I)." https://catalog.unc.edu/undergraduate/ideas-in-action/triple-i/.

157. UNC-Chapel Hill, IDEAs in Action, "Focus Capacities." https://ideasinaction.unc.edu/focus-capacities/.

158. IDEAs in Action, "Focus Capacities."

159. UNC-Chapel Hill, IDEAs in Action, "Research and Discovery." https://catalog.unc.edu/undergraduate/ideas-in-action/research-discovery/.

160. Colby Bermel, "Is studying abroad an excuse to party?" USA Today, January 26, 2016; Rebecca Ballhaus, "Do Drinking Abroad Programs Have A Studying Problem? Study Abroad Wasted?" HuffPost, August 22, 2011.

161. UNC-Chapel Hill, IDEAs in Action, "Communication Beyond Carolina." https://catalog.unc.edu/undergraduate/ideas-in-action/communication-beyond/.

162. UNC-Chapel Hill, IDEAs in Action, "Preparing Graduates to Become Lifelong Learners." https://ideasinaction.unc.edu/.

163. Montás, p. 219.

164. Montás pp. 213, 212.

165. Columbia College, American Revolution and Founding Texts: Required Readings, https://www.college.columbia.edu/core/content/american-revolution-and-founding-texts.

166. Columbia College, Global Core Requirement, http://www.college.columbia.edu/core/classes/gc.

167. Hutchins, p. 81.

168. Hutchins, p. 66.

169. Hutchins, p. 62.

170. Hutchins, p. 59.

171. Hutchins, p. 77.

172. Hutchins, p. 85.

About the Author

Shannon Watkins

Shannon Watkins joined the Martin Center in March 2017 as a reporter focused on North Carolina higher education. She holds a bachelor of arts degree in Spanish and Linguistics from the University of California, Los Angeles. She also studied at the University of Carlos III in Madrid, Spain.

Her articles have appeared in *Townhall*, the *Washington Examiner, The Daily Caller, Rare Politics, The Carolina Journal,* and *The Heartland Institute.* In her free time, Watkins enjoys reading philosophy, history, and classic literature. She lives outside of Raleigh, North Carolina, with her husband and three children.

About the Martin Center

The James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal is a private nonprofit institute dedicated to improving higher education policy. Our mission is to renew and fulfill the promise of higher education in North Carolina and across the country.

We advocate responsible governance, viewpoint diversity, academic quality, cost-effective education solutions, and innovative market-based reform. We do that by studying and reporting on critical issues in higher education and recommending policies that can create change—especially at the state and local level.

353 E. Six Forks Road Suite 200
Raleigh, NC 27609

919.828.1400
Fax: 919.828.7455

www.jamesgmartin.center

THE JAMES G. MARTIN CENTER FOR ACADEMIC RENEWAL